

A woman with brown hair in an updo, seen from the back, wearing a long, flowing purple gown with a ruffled waist. She is looking over her shoulder towards the right. The background is a soft-focus landscape with purple and pink flowers and a white building in the distance.

*Misadventures
OF THE
Heart*

A *Lady's* GUIDE
TO KISS
A *Rake*

TANYA
WILDE

A Lady's Guide to Kiss a Rake

Tanya Wilde

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Prologue

"I've never been kissed."

"What!" Lady Belle said, smothering a laugh of horror at Lady Josephine's confession.

"Oh my," said Lady Evelyn, "I can't imagine not being kissed before."

Jo glanced down at her pretty silk taffeta gown as a flood of despair swept over her. She was going to die a virgin.

"All I want is one kiss from a man who would make it spectacular. A kiss to rule over all kisses."

Belle smiled, her eyes sparkling. "You mean a kiss from a rake."

"St. Aldwyn seems to enjoy your company," Evelyn said thoughtfully.

"St. Aldwyn enjoys bating me," Jo replied.

A loud bubble of laughter escaped Evelyn, drawing the attention of a group of ladies near them. "That is the most absurd thing I have ever heard!"

"Well he does, and besides, St. Aldwyn doesn't count."

"Oh Jo, stop being such a ninny! I wager you can seduce a kiss from any man in this crowd of gentlemen," Belle said gleefully.

"No, I—"

"She is right," Evelyn chimed in, "any man would be lucky to have your attention."

"No, I—"

Belle clapped her hands together. "I have a fabulous idea! We pick a gentleman, who you then have to seduce a kiss from. Oh, don't look at me like that. We will make it worth your while. A wager, if you will."

"I believe I have just the right gentleman for the wager," reported Evelyn. "My husband told me that the Earl of Craven arrived in London today and will be in attendance tonight."

A mischievous glint entered Belle's eye. "He will be perfect as he is rumored to be quite handsome and wicked."

Jo stared at them in horror. Lord Craven was a rake, and not just any rake, a notorious one at that. Whispers that one glance from him could ruin you circled his name. No way would she be able to seduce a kiss from him.

"What shall we wager?" Evelyn asked just before Belle excused herself, slipping into the crowd.

Jo wrinkled her nose. "There is nothing that can move me to accept your wager." Movement to her right caught her attention and she groaned. "What's *he* doing here?" He being the insufferable—

delectable—Marquis of St. Aldwyn.

“I do not understand why you dislike him so,” Evelyn said, glancing his way. “He’s very entertaining.”

Jo snorted. “No, he is not.”

Evelyn laughed. “Well he’s obscenely wealthy.”

“Yes, it is rumored to be so,” Jo said tartly, eyeing the devil in question before glancing away.

“Oh stop, what has St. Aldwyn done to deserve such scorn? Oh bother, now he’s looking at us. What might he think now?” She gave Jo a teasing nudge.

“He best look passed us if he knows what is best for him,” Jo muttered under her breath, but her gaze shifted to him again, only to note that he indeed stared their way. Her attention refocused on the crowded ballroom in search of the notorious rake, Craven. Not that she would recognize him if she saw him, she had only ever heard rumors about him, never having the unfortunate pleasure of meeting the scoundrel.

“I wonder if he has arrived yet.”

“If who has arrived yet?”

Evelyn and Jo swirled as St. Aldwyn came up from behind them. *Sneaky little rat.*

“Beatrice,” Jo answered with the first name that came to mind. “I haven’t seen her around yet.” She frowned down at Evelyn’s foot that nudged her.

“He as in *Lady Beatrice*?” St. Aldwyn asked in a mocking tone.

“Well no—” Evelyn began but was interrupted as Belle rushed toward them, bubbling in excitement.

“He is here! You should see—oh, good evening my lord. I did not see you there.” Belle’s excitement faded to a calm and collected smile.

“Apparently.”

“Well if you will excuse us?” she said as she dragged Evelyn and Jo in another direction. “Mother wishes to have a word.” The last words were said over her shoulder, knowing very well that her mother passed away when she was but a fledgling.

“How rude you are, Belle,” Jo chastised her friend as they stopped in front of a potted plant, leaving St. Aldwyn to stare at them with narrowed eyes across the ballroom.

“Oh posh, he was never going to leave. Anyhow, Lord Craven arrived only moments ago,” she whispered in a hushed tone.

Jo swallowed her panic as she listened to her friends conspire her ruination. She couldn’t do this, she told herself. If Craven was as handsome as the man who had just materialized out of the crowd like an avenging angel, she would call for an urgent discussion with her friends. Jo gaped at the image of the man. “Goodness.”

She was aware of her friends jerking their heads toward her. Upon seeing her expression, they turned to what had discomposed her so. Jo only barely noticed their mouths drop open as well.

“Oh my.” She heard Evelyn whisper and then Belle’s, “That’s him, that’s Lord Craven.”

The man was sin incarnate with his dark hair combed back from of his face and dressed entirely in black. She was pretty certain his eyes were black as well, but was too far away to tell. He reminded her of the angel of death.

“He is the one I’m supposed to kiss?” Jo asked stunned.

“Amazing, is he not?” Belle said with excitement.

“Impossible.”

Chapter 1

It should have been an ordinary day for Lady Josephine Tremont, but fate, it seemed, had made other arrangements. Oh, the day had begun normally enough—except for two little things: the wager Jo had somehow managed to get muddled in (that alone seemed to hang over her head like a thunderous cloud) and the fact that her friends Lady Belle and Lady Evelyn stood before her, schooling her on how to go about luring a kiss from the most notorious rake in England.

The Earl of Craven.

All in all, Jo had lacked the foresight to say no, and now she was reaping the consequences in one of the most opulent rooms in her home: the parlour. Needless to say, it seemed reasonable to believe that her friends were not only schooling her on how to entice a kiss, but ultimately, how to ruin her sterling reputation. Not that her reputation could be considered sterling, she was a self-proclaimed spinster after all. In the eyes of society that placed her in the category of being crippled in some way.

The dramatic motion of Belle's arms interrupted her musings.

"First," Belle put in, "you will need to draw Craven into a web of mystery and intrigue."

"No problem."

Evelyn chortled at the sarcasm in Jo's voice.

Belle ignored them and continued, "Then you must send a smoldering stare in his direction, one that promises untold pleasure. After which you will ignore him for the remainder of the evening."

Jo shook her head in disbelief. "You are insane." *A smoldering stare that promises untold pleasure?* Why, it must be the most ridiculous thing Jo had ever heard.

Belle continued, ignoring Jo and tucking a wayward curl behind her ear, "Lastly, you will accept a dance from him, and while you are twirling about, your body shall make love to his to the rhythm of the music. He will never be able to resist you after that."

Jo stared at Belle, mouth agape. "I take that back, you are not insane, you're beyond demented. How am I to accomplish all your instructions in one evening? And make love to him with my body while we dance? How is that even possible?"

"Oh, you do not have to do all that in one evening," Evelyn said with a crease in her brow. "It will take at least three or four evenings."

Jo lifted an incredulous brow. "You agree with this insanity?"

Her friend choked back a laugh. "I don't see why not. I've seen Belle wrap gentlemen around her finger. If there is a method that will work, it will be hers."

Jo regarded them with a skeptical look. A few months ago, Evelyn had married the renowned recluse, the Earl of Grey, and never once had to seduce her husband. On the contrary, she had done everything in her power to resist the Earl's relentless pursuit, but love had won out in the end. Belle on the other hand, was as unattached and inexperienced as Jo.

Belle nodded. "Exactly—besides it's not so hard. When you dance, the rhythm of your body should inspire the suggestions. Trust me, he will pick up on it, no matter how subtle."

"Yes, but you do not want to come on too strong. Remember, your goal is one kiss, not to be seduced," Evelyn commented in a thoughtful manner.

"A kiss could still ruin me."

"Well then, you will just have to make it worth your while," Belle murmured with a sly smile, reaching for a lemon cake.

"I'm not as fearless as you are," Jo argued.

Two snorts were her only answer.

"Very well, I am not as fearless at flirtation. Draw him into a web of mystery and intrigue? I do not even know what that means."

"Oh, that's the easy part," Belle said brightly. "Evelyn and I will whisper some intriguing tidbits in the right ears and the rest, as they say, will be history. All you need to do is work on your smolder, woven with a hint of surprise, to cast his way."

"Woven with a hint of surprise?" Jo asked, skeptical.

Evelyn nodded. "When you draw his attention, he will recall the intriguing whispers about you. So when you note his regard, a hint of surprise should be displayed in your gaze, as though you haven't even noticed him before that moment."

"Then you drop your gaze to admire his well-built form, a hint of a smile playing across your features, only then do you glance away," Belle explained.

"Uh, where does the smolder come in?" Jo asked, surprised she could even speak after hearing *that*.

"I suggest she imparts the smolder when she admires his body," Evelyn said, excitement lighting her eyes. "Then when she locks gazes with him, there should be a hint of a smile on her lips. It will give him the impression that whatever thought had crossed her mind during her perusal was her little secret."

"Brilliant Evelyn!" Belle said with a clap of her hands. "She can turn away without even acknowledging him, as though she had played her mind fun and now she's moving on."

"Mind fun?" Jo recognized the terror in her own voice.

"He will be curious enough to ask for a dance," Evelyn agreed on a nod.

“No,” Belle said tapping her chin in thought, “he will not ask out of curiosity, I wager it will irk him to no end that she dismissed him from her mind after what he would assume to be a thorough examination of his body.”

“I do believe you are right.”

“And I believe,” Jo put in, exasperated, “you have forgotten I am still here!”

“Oh, Jo we are sorry,” Evelyn said with a shake of her head. “It’s just so exciting!”

“Yes, but am I not supposed to be the excited one?” Jo muttered beneath her breath, then on a louder note, “I daresay I may not be able to pull it off.”

“Oh posh!” Belle said waving her hand in the air. “Of course you will, but you must want to pull it off, otherwise it won’t work and you will come off looking strange.”

“And we would not want that,” Jo muttered.

“Besides it’s a wager,” Evelyn reminded her. “If it was easy, it wouldn’t be this fun.”

“What of my brother? The great and powerful Marquis of Warton. He’s been hounding my every step, watching me like a hawk. He even warned me away from the Marquis of St. Aldwyn, a man I have never shown any interest in. What do you imagine he will do once he takes note of my apparent interest in Craven?”

Her brother would send her to Green Rose Cottage without listening to reason. This would be fine, except that Jo was part of a group of individuals who saved women and children that were abused by their families or spouses. She could never abandon these projects any more than she could abandon her friends.

Unfortunately, for all their planning and conspiring, things had gone terribly awry with their last project, hence the reason her brother was acting as her shadow lately. At least some good had come from that disaster. Evelyn had realized how much she loved her now husband and even their good friend Lord Weatherly had found love with Lady Madeleine, who happened to be the subject of their project at the time. This wager had seemed just the thing to take her mind off the humdrum of monotony nipping at her heels these past weeks.

“Do not worry about your brother, he will be too preoccupied to note your flirtations,” Belle murmured, a spark entering her gaze.

Jo only lifted a brow. At least once in her life she yearned to be kissed by a man who possessed great passion, which happened to be why she hadn’t protested much against the wager in the first place. If they had a plan to keep her brother occupied, she would not meddle.

A mock sigh heaved from her chest. “I suppose I shall have to work on my smolder then.”

Broad smiles met her statement.

"Just don't tell your husband," she told Evelyn. "No need to attract unwanted attention." And by unwanted attention she meant the Marquis of St. Aldwyn.

"Of course not!" Evelyn said offended. "I would never do that. Besides, we ladies need our secrets."

Belle snorted. "Tell that to your husband as soon as he learns you have included yourself in Jo's next project."

"I will tell him." When Belle and Jo lifted their brows she finished with a smile, "Eventually."

"You promised Grey you would inform him of any projects you wish to be included in," Jo pointed out even though she had no intention of involving her friend in the next project. Not that she wished to exclude Evelyn, but her husband could be an overprotective beast.

"*Dangerous* projects, and since it won't be dangerous, I do not see the need to inform him of anything."

"There's no faulting that logic," Belle said with a smile.

Jo rolled her eyes. "Of course you would gather that."

If Grey suspected anything untoward transpired under his nose, he would march straight to her brother with his suspicions. That would be disastrous.

"How exactly do you plan to keep my brother distracted, Belle?" Jo finally asked when curiosity got the better of her. "It will not be easy to engage his interest or distract him once he's set on a course of action."

Her friend's eyes lit with excitement as she said, "I do not have to distract him because my cousins are en route to visit for an entire month. Your brother will be the recipient of all their attention."

An involuntary shudder rippled through Jo. She had met Belle's cousins only once before and only for a moment. They proved exhausting. No doubt shadowed her mind that Poppy, Holly and Willow would take London by storm, never mind Brahm. If Belle had enlisted their assistance to keep Brahm occupied, no known force in London would manage to stop them. She almost felt sorry for her brother. Almost.

"That's good, since I've been informed of a potential project, but will receive all the details once more definite information is obtained."

And it could not come soon enough. To sit idly by, attending dull balls, tedious soirees and dreadful bland tea gatherings drove her to the brink of boredom.

"About that," Evelyn said, her expression suddenly grave. "Matthew has been asking many questions about all of the projects you have participated in."

“What?” Jo and Belle said simultaneously.

“I meant to tell you sooner but it slipped my mind,” Evelyn said, her voice apologetic.

“Let him ask,” Jo murmured after a moment of internal debate. “You cannot tell him what you do not know. He will tire of it in due time.”

Evelyn blushed. “I will admit I rather enjoy his methods of seduction and hope he does not tire of it soon.”

“Evelyn!” Jo exclaimed, shocked.

Belle laughed. “Who would have thought you were a wallflower only a few short months ago?”

“Things have changed, yes.”

“I am happy for you, Evelyn,” Jo said on a soft smile. “However, I do not see how I will be able to seduce a kiss from Craven, what with your husband asking questions and my brother keeping watch.”

The disappointment in Jo’s chest at the notion of not getting her kiss surprised her.

Belle shook her head in denial. “You do not remember Poppy, Holly and Willow well. They will keep your brother occupied and I’m certain Evelyn will manage to keep her husband distracted. You remain focused on your smolder.”

“Smolder, right. I shall practice it to perfection.”

A light clear of a throat drew their gazes to the door, where Jo’s footman appeared with a neatly folded note on a silver tray. “My lady, a note has arrived for Lady Grey.”

“Oh dear,” Evelyn said as she jumped from the divan to retrieve the note from the footman. With one smooth action she unfolded the note and examined the contents with a smile.

Belle sent a droll stare Evelyn’s way. “How rude of Grey to summon you whenever he feels you have been away for too long.”

Evelyn’s smile widened. “I do not mind.”

“Why would you?” Jo muttered. “If I had a husband like that at home I would never leave.”

“What does it say?” Belle asked before she snatched the note from Evelyn’s fingers.

“Belle! Give that back, it’s private,” Evelyn admonished while Belle sputtered as she read the missive.

“Well I never! Do you know what he said, Jo?” Belle asked incredulous.

“Obviously not.”

“Get your derriere home now, or I will come fetch you.”

Evelyn snatched the note back. “He believes me up to no good if I am gone too long, especially if I am in the company of my friends.”

Jo gave Evelyn a pointed stare that said: *If you assume you can*

keep any activities secret from your husband, you are delusional. When it came to his wife, Grey's protectiveness was amplified. The end. He did not tolerate her absence for long before he would go in search of her, almost as though the thought of being parted from his wife was unbearable.

A stab of envy pierced Jo. She had once thought to marry and start her own family, but had seen too much abuse and horridness to desire such fanciful notions. She would prefer not to subject her heart to that sort of pain—and there would be pain. It always followed, whether from sickness or betrayal, death or lies. *Gah!* Better to pour all her attention into her somewhat dangerous but immensely satisfying projects.

"He cares, and in the grand scheme of things that is all that matters."

"There is a difference between possession and obsession," Belle muttered with a dark tone. "Grey borders on obsession."

"I like his obsession," Evelyn said, a blush stealing across her face.

"Of course you do. We, on the other hand, are highly skeptical and very suspicious."

Evelyn chuckled as she gathered her pelisse, clearly intending to obey her husband's wishes. With a kiss on each of their cheeks, she murmured her goodbyes. The dreamy-eyed expression on her face causing Jo and Belle to glance heavenward.

"I'll see you ladies later!"

As soon as Evelyn cleared the room Belle stood, her hands on her hips, tapping her right foot in agitation.

"Is something amiss?"

"You cannot be considering including Evelyn in any further projects?"

Jo stretched out with languid arms on the chaise. "Do you presume I would risk such a thing when Grey's never far from her side?"

"She's now aware there may be a project soon," Belle pointed out.

Jo waved her friend's concern aside. "She is so occupied with her husband and newfound happiness she will not be mindful of us when we proceed without her. Have you noted their distraction?"

Belle nodded. "Of course."

"Have you observed how at every event they disappear for hours on end?"

"Oh, I've noticed," Belle said, her eyes dancing. "They return all doe eyed and walking on air."

"They are causing quite the scandal," Jo confirmed. "It is my hope all eyes are on them when I'm off winning our wager."

Belle chuckled. "I have no doubt you will try. Be that as it may, it

is my hope the entertainment you will provide us may occupy her mind.”

“No doubt Craven will reckon me a simpering fool.”

Not to mention her brother would skin Craven’s hide and display it on their front door as fair warning for any man if he learned of this wager. It would not matter whether Craven had been aware or not. He would be a dead man. Jo may not be simpering, but perhaps she was a fool.

“I daresay he would never consider a lady of your stature to be interested in him. That is why your chances of winning are slim.”

Jo snorted. “Yet you gave me lessons.” She was stealing a kiss, not the crown jewels. How hard could it be? It would simply be a matter of perfecting her smolder and keeping everyone occupied as to not suspect her intentions.

Craven may not be the man she would have picked if she had any choice in the matter, but he would do. Jo tried not to dwell on the one man she would have picked or at least considered picking had it been up to her.

“Well, we had to give you some lessons or else you would have failed horribly. At least now you have a chance.”

“I do not know why I ever agreed to be part of such an outrageous wager,” Jo muttered, snatching up a lemon cake.

“The why of it is quite clear. You long for a grand adventure.”

“I have plenty of adventure in my life,” Jo protested, recalling her projects and how they helped the lives of others. Often they were even a bit dangerous, which added more appeal to them.

“That is different. You long to be swept off your feet.”

“This adventure won’t sweep me of my feet. It’s going to sweep the tattered remains of my reputation to a remote village in the country.”

Belle’s laughter filled the room, though it sounded more like an evil cackle than an expression of amusement. “They say the country men are more masculine and hard from all the labor. You may just be lucky to be sent off to the countryside.”

Jo snorted contemptuously. But perhaps Belle had a point. She would receive the information of their new project in a day or so, so she had until then to win the wager and hope some adventure came of it. At the very least it would prove the distraction she wished to get her mind off her brother’s pestering ways and the other pestering males in her life...

Brilliant.

Chapter 2

“This is insanity, Belle. I cannot do it, I simply cannot.”

They stood beneath a large fern overlooking the ballroom of their hosts, Lady Evelyn and her husband, the Earl of Grey. Evelyn, however, had disappeared along with her husband, which made Jo suspect they weren’t tending to their duties as hosts but rather other pleasantries. The event had turned out quite the crush, despite the fact that the season was nearing its end. Everyone still appeared to be equally enthralled and scandalized by the match the two newlyweds made. Love never seemed sweeter than the couple who, so engrossed with each other, never let their gazes stray far nor their hands.

“Yes, you can. Now go.”

“No, I cannot.” Jo’s hands began to shake, evidence of her nervousness.

Belle nudged Jo forward a step. “Enough dillydallying. Remember what I told you and you’ll be fine.”

Jo stared wide-eyed at her friend. He would never fall for her act. Why should he pay her any heed? Surely someone the likes of Craven would not be the sort to pay attention to whispering hearsay, no matter how intriguing the rumors. As a notorious rake, he would see straight through her ploy. Since up till this night she had never done anything this outrageous to gain the attention of a man, she was bound to slip up somehow.

Jo cast a nervous glance at the man in question. Oh, bollocks. She should be regarding this wager as an adventure, but if their hostess proved an example Jo may end up leg-shackled before the count of three. Craven would not make for an exemplary husband; at least not from what she believed.

So, do not get caught.

If only Belle would tell her what rumor they’d had their good friend Lord Weatherly whisper into Craven’s ear, but she refused to say a word on the matter. According to Belle, her lack of knowledge enhanced the cloak of mystery and intrigue surrounding her. They may have a point.

“Would you just go?”

Jo’s head bounced up and down, and with one last nervous glance toward her friend, she started forward at a pace that would put a snail to shame. More than anything, she wanted to be like her friends: beautiful, admired and, like Evelyn, seduced. But now, as her feet led her to potential ruin, it seemed all rather ridiculous. Regardless, tonight she would initiate the seduction of a kiss. All she had to do was attract his notice, make him aware of her.

“Mystery and intrigue,” she muttered beneath her breath as she made her way through an elegant drawing room filled with the *crème de la crème* of London society. Jo schooled her expression just as Belle had taught her, gliding with slow and deliberate movements, swaying her hips in a manner she hoped appeared provocative.

This is madness. Madness!

Her thoughts were dulled by the drumming of her heart. No doubt her heart sensed there would be no turning back, and Jo found, in that moment, she did not wish to. Already excitement bubbled up inside her, thoughts of seducing a kiss from a notorious rake filling her with anticipation. Her earlier nervousness evaporated with the sway of each hip.

Adorned in one of Madam De La Frey’s glittering low-cut gowns, she was guaranteed to draw the attention of most gentlemen in the drawing room, although her brother’s dark scowl succeeded in keeping them at a distance.

Jo knew exactly what the men saw when they stared at her. Black silk covered her body, giving her a dramatic, almost exotic appearance. Her dark hair had been braided loosely around her head to expertly bring out the green of her eyes. Cat eyes, as her mother used to say. The bodice was close-fitted, drawing attention to her abundant charms while the skirt hugged her hips seductively, flowing into a glittering swirl of material that pooled at her feet.

She’d been skeptical when the Madam had suggested black as the color for this particular night, but when the dress arrived earlier that day, Jo had known it would be unparalleled.

A gown befitting a seductress.

The old Jo will be no more.

It also hadn’t escaped her notice that black was the opposite of white, which reflected purity. Black on the other hand, reflected the color of sin and wickedness. A truth confirmed when her brother almost had an attack of the vapors when he saw her outfit. Jo even had half a mind to retrieve her smelling salts when she noted his expression. Clever as always, Jo had covered her dress with a cloak and by the time her brother had glimpsed her gown it had been too late. It hadn’t stopped him, however, from ordering her back home, even though he’d been skillfully outmaneuvered. Precious time had been wasted to dispel him of any such notion and while he may have relented he still continued to glare and growl at any man who wandered within ten feet of her.

A glance in his direction revealed Belle’s cousins—the ebullient Poppy and Willow—making their way toward her brother. Holly was nowhere to be seen.

Jo spotted Lady Madeleine, wife to their friend Lord Weatherly,

and made her way toward the beautiful woman, placing Craven directly in her line of vision.

“Lady Josephine! How delightful to see you,” Lady Madeleine greeted with a warm smile once Jo reached her.

“Lady Madeleine, you look positively glowing. Dare I say it is Wes that has put that the sparkle in your eye?”

Lady Madeleine blushed and Jo’s lyrical laughter filled the air. “How has your father taken the news of your elopement?”

“Oh, he has disowned me,” Madeleine said with a bright smile, causing Jo to chuckle. “I’ve often wondered, Lady Josephine, how you became such good friends with my husband?” Madeleine asked, the curiosity in her tone unmistakable.

Jo raised a brow, surprised by the question. “He’s never told you?”

Lady Madeleine shook her head.

“He’s probably too embarrassed to say,” Jo teased.

“I take it you will not entertain me with the details either?”

“Oh no,” Jo said raising her hands in the air, “and deprive Wes of regaling you with the tale himself? I would never be so heartless.”

“I guess I will just have to find a way to retrieve the information from him,” Madeleine said on a whimsical note.

Holly, the third and youngest of Belle’s cousins, appeared so suddenly by their side that Lady Madeleine and Jo all but jumped out of their skins.

“Lady Madeleine, how lovely to meet you at last!” Holly exclaimed with a bounce in her step. “I do apologize for my forwardness but if I waited for my cousin or one of her friends to introduce us,” she gave Jo a pointed stare, “I would wait forever!”

Lady Madeleine’s wide eyes met Jo’s amused ones. If she hadn’t met Belle’s cousins yet, she would get an earful from one of them now. With poor Lady Madeleine’s attention seized, Holly provided the perfect opportunity for Jo to glance in the direction of Craven. Now, for the leading act.

Under the pretense of boredom, Jo angled her body away from the girls, right in the direction of Lord Craven. With slow precision her gaze drifted over the faces in the crowd in what would appear as casual perusal, slipping passed Craven and over to the gentlemen on his right, only to return back to him as she caught his regard.

From across the room their gazes locked, and Jo allowed a hint of surprise to enter her features, just as Belle had tutored her. It wasn’t so hard since he possessed the face of a Greek god, all chiseled jaw and high cheekbones. Handsome in a classical way. She’d been wrong about his hair color, however. Reddish brown hair framed his perfectly carved face, every angle made to enhance his beauty. Eyes as

blue as ice gazed back at her and a shiver of apprehension stole over her. *Not black then.* Even from where she stood all-consuming heat slammed into her. This man possessed the ability to set her aflame and turn her to stone at the same time. His mouth, however, gave pause. A cynical curve lined that luscious mouth, giving the impression of a permanent snarl. No, not a man who suffered fools gladly.

Jo had half a mind to retreat, but her inner voice mocked: *Are you afraid of a mere man?*

Well, no, but he did seem all too powerful and not a man to be trifled with. But foolishness won out and she dropped her gaze to his chest, letting it slide over his broad shoulders, which bespoke of great strength. Beneath all those clothes, his chest would be as hard as a boulder. He would have strong arms, too, perfect to carry a damsel, she mused.

Her smoldering gaze dipped even lower, devouring his long muscled legs until they disappeared into his perfectly polished hessian boots, before it made its way back up to his chest again, a slight upturn of her mouth now planted on her face. Those strong legs would carry a damsel up any flight of stairs without so much as a hint of strain.

After her thorough perusal of his body, Jo allowed her gaze to lock with his once more for a brief moment before she turned away, affectively dismissing him from her mind. Or at least she hoped that was the impression she presented. Those blue eyes had turned predatory with her last glance, and they would haunt her sleep tonight.

Too enlivened to follow Holly and Madeleine's prattle about a poor match some lady made, Jo only listened with mild interest. Her brain mulled over whether her smolder had actually looked like a smolder and not like she was in pain. Soon enough she would learn whether she'd caught his interest or not. How embarrassing it would be if she could not manage to catch the attention of a renowned libertine.

"I find it damned disturbing how the three of you seem to excel at causing trouble," Wes drawled as he came up behind Belle.

"It keeps us young," Belle returned.

He chuckled, his eyes darting to his wife. "True," he acknowledged. "So long as you do not embroil Madeleine in any of your mad schemes, I will play along."

"You have never complained before."

"You have never included my wife before."

"You never had a wife before," Belle shot back.

"Again, true, but I would rather not have Maddy run about

London in the dead of night saving lost souls.”

Belle nodded in understanding, noting how her friend’s attention turned to Craven.

“You’ve outdone yourself this time, Lady Belle,” Wes noted. “But Craven is not a man to be taken lightly and not a man to be toyed with.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing she only means to entice a kiss.”

Surprise lit his brow. “You believe Craven would stop at one kiss?”

Belle frowned. “Jo can manage Craven.”

“Have you thought of how St. Aldwyn would react to this new adventure of hers?”

“What does St. Aldwyn have to do with anything?” A curious note had rolled off Wes’s voice, but nothing that spoke of an ulterior motive, Belle decided.

His brow almost reached his hairline when he spoke, “Even you cannot be so obtuse.” He nodded in the direction of St. Aldwyn. “He hardly ever takes his eyes off Josephine. As soon as he learns of her supposed interest in Craven, I imagine the hold on his tight restraints will snap.”

The corners of Belle’s eyes crinkled. *How interesting.* When Belle and Evelyn had first joined Jo’s projects, Evelyn’s now husband, the Earl of Grey, along with Evelyn’s brother, Westfield, and their good friend St. Aldwyn had become suspicious. Each of the men then decided to spy on one of the women. Westfield had started to appear wherever Belle set out for, whereas St. Aldwyn had trailed Jo. But she never thought anything of it because, like Craven, St. Aldwyn happened to be notorious rake with no intention of settling down. Maybe he’d be interested after all?

“Whatever you are plotting, it is a bad idea.”

“Nonsense Wes,” Belle said, a smile enveloping her face. “My ideas are always brilliant.”

“That my dear, is debatable. I happen to know you well enough to know that once your mind latches onto something, it’s almost impossible for you to let go. Trouble usually follows soon after.”

Belle ignored him. “I cannot believe I did not see it before now.”

“Perhaps a good reason exists for that,” Wes commented, his arms folding over his chest.

“Do you believe he saw the exchange between Jo and Craven?” Belle asked, examining the man in question.

“It’s hard to tell what he observed, he’s frowning in her direction, but I do not think he witnessed her blatant regard of the Earl.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

“For one thing, his face hasn’t turned purple.”

A low chuckle flowed from between her lips. Wes had a point. If what he said held any truth, St. Aldwyn would have charged to Jo's side by now if he thought she had designs on Craven. Good, it would be better for him not to suspect anything lest they wanted a hornet on their tail.

However, Belle wasn't worried. None of the men desired to end up in the parson's trap, which left her friend to find her adventure. Jo's dedicated pursuit to save the world left her somewhat solemn at times.

Damien, the fifth Marquis of St. Aldwyn, scowled in the direction of Lady Josephine for no apparent reason other than the fact that he was acutely aware of her presence.

That irritated him.

He would much rather be enjoying some widow's charms than pining after Lady Josephine. Not that he ever pined. Pining would suggest he was a love-sick fool. Ghastly business that. No, perhaps the better term to describe his condition was a conundrum. Because Lady Josephine was exactly that: a conundrum—and he, well, was intrigued.

At first Damien hadn't given a damn about Lady Josephine and what she did on her own time. But after learning of her supposed projects—helping abused women escape the hands of their abusers—and then discovering that the “kidnapping” of Lady Madeleine had not been the first disappearance of an elite society member, curiosity had overcome detachment. If Lady Josephine's little band of vigilantes were only “kidnapping” people who were being hurt, Damien possessed half a mind to join them, but on further inspection of the disappearances, inconsistencies had become apparent. For one thing, not all the disappearances were aristocrats, and neither were all of them women. After digging a little deeper it also became apparent that some of the disappearances had nothing to do with abuse, which had turned his curiosity into downright suspicion.

“Still spying on Lady Josephine?” Grey drawled, coming up beside him.

“Still dragging your wife off to dark corners?” Damien shot back.

“Naturally.”

“Your infatuation with your wife is disgusting.”

“If I have disgusted you then I am doing something right.”

Damien shot Grey a glare. Grey excelled at insulting him, but Damien put up with it. Only because their friendship had been one hellish road.

“What possessed Warton to allow his sister out of the house dressed like that?” Damien suddenly asked, scowling at the lady in

question.

"I imagine he did not know."

"Then saints preserve us. What possessed her to wear that?"

Grey shrugged. "I believe Lady Josephine and Lady Belle are both shopping at the same dressmaker as my wife."

"Bloody hell, she should be banned."

Grey glanced in the direction of his wife, his gaze filling with heat. "I, on the other hand, am pleased for the woman's creations, whoever she is."

"Madam De La Frey."

"I beg your pardon?" Grey asked distracted.

"The woman making the infamous dresses is Madam De La Frey."

Grey shook his head. "Can't say that I've met her."

"Neither can I. The lady is as elusive as the night itself. It's rumored she wears a mask when she meets her clients to keep her identity a secret."

Grey appeared as intrigued as Damien sounded. "That would mean she could be anyone, even someone we know."

Or have bedded, Damien mused. His gaze traveled over the women in the drawing room. "She could be here, right now and we would be none the wiser."

"So long as she doesn't stop creating her designs, I can't say I give a damn."

Damien rubbed his chin in consideration. He loved a good puzzle. But first, he had to piece together the puzzle that was Lady Josephine.

"I can't believe you invited that bastard," Damien said, nodding in the direction of James Shaw.

Grey shrugged. "I didn't."

That earned his host a frown. "You let your wife invite him after she ran off with him?"

"Apparently there is no getting rid of him and for some reason my wife is fond of him," Grey answered, a sudden edge entering his voice. "As long as he keeps his hands to himself, I will tolerate the man. Besides, I would much rather she invite him where I can keep an eye on him than run off behind my back."

Damien understood, though he doubted he would have been able to tolerate the man's presence if his wife had run off with him. Such restraint did not present itself in his nature.

"Are you not of the view that your obsession with the ladies might have gone far enough?"

The question caught Damien off guard and he raised his brow. "Saints man, I have no notion of what you speak. Spit it out or leave me in peace."

"Have you not taken this," Grey motioned with a hand in the

hair, “this shadowing of Lady Belle and Lady Josephine, of following them on errands, hiding behind pillars and potted plants, too far?”

Damien blanched at Grey’s assessment. Surely they did not appear that unbecoming?

“It’s not that indecent,” Damien growled, scowling at his friend.

“No? So you didn’t bribe Lady Josephine’s maid into sending you updates on her daily activities?”

“How the hell do you know that?” Damien snapped.

“Westfield mentioned it. He also said the pillars and plants were your idea.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“He’s hiding behind a pillar right now,” Grey pointed out, nodding at his brother-in-law across the room.

“It’s not my fault the Tremaine siblings are as mad as a March hare.”

“May I remind you I married one of those siblings?”

Damien nodded. “Crazy as the lot of them, I say.”

“It needs to stop, my wife has become uncomfortable,” Grey snapped.

“So go lecture Westfield about it.”

“I’m about to. I’m discussing it with you first.”

Damien lips curled in annoyance before he turned to Grey, his expression blank as understanding dawned.

“If you have something to say, spit it out.”

“Back off from the ladies.”

A slow humorless smile lined Damien’s mouth. “Switched sides, have you?”

“There are no sides.”

“Wrong.”

They glared at each other with glacial eyes, uncaring of the attention they attracted when the tension and sudden animosity between them became apparent. Both big men, neither of them had any issue with starting a brawl. They both knew Grey’s wife had been behind the request. Too bad Damien never bowed down to threats.

As if summoned by their thoughts, Evelyn appeared by her husband’s side, a scowl in place. “Whatever is going on between the two of you, stop it this instant.”

Grey’s eyes never left Damien’s, but his tone held a gentle note when he replied, “Nothing is wrong, sweetheart. St. Aldwyn and I were just discussing distasteful habits.”

“You discussed, but the orchestra drowned out your voice.”

Grey took a threatening step forward but stopped when his wife hissed, “Do not dare make scene! Both of you. This is my night and I will not have the two of you ruin it with a brawl.”

Grey visibly tensed at the anger in his wife's tone while Damien's lips stretched wide. So infatuated with his wife, Grey would never dare do anything that may cause her unhappiness.

Not one to miss an opportunity Damien slipped away while Grey placated his wife. He searched the crowd for Westfield and a foul curse escaped his lips, landing on a group of young ladies' ears, whose mouths dropped open in response. Damn. Even from a distance it was clear his friend lurked behind a pillar a few feet away from Lady Belle.

Damien cringed at the sight. Damnation. He would have to speak with Westfield about his inclination toward pillars and pots. If they did not stop they would present all the hallmarks of two besotted idiots. Ridiculous. Grown men did not spy on ladies, nor did they hide behind pillars and plants. They came, they saw and they seized whatever they bloody well wanted. That had always been the way of their species. It was time to put an end to this madness.

Chapter 3

Almost every morning since Josephine had been a little girl, when her eyes greeted a new day, a wave of exuberance accompanied the light. There were, however, exceptions. Some days she awoke with determination, especially if a strenuous task lay before her that day. Other times boredom greeted her, as when dreary weather marked the dawn. More often than not though, Josephine woke with a sense of excitement, and today was no different. She had awoken recalling events from the previous evening.

Her mind still reeled from her boldness and the fact that she'd went ahead with Belle's mad plan to intrigue Craven. Granted, it had been lots of fun. Still drowsy, she stretched out her legs and curved her lips upward in a smile. Excitement still curled in her belly when her maid, Sarah entered the room.

"What time is it?" Jo asked, sensing it was still too early.

"Six o'clock, my lady."

"Stars, Sarah, what madness is this?"

"His lordship has requested your presence, my lady."

Jo groaned. *What now?* "Tell him I will be down momentarily, Sarah."

Brahm had always been an early riser, sometimes even forcing Jo to rise early as well. In particular, he did so when he had something on his mind, as it appeared he did now. Had he noticed her interest in Craven after all? No, her bedroom door did not hang on its hinges, which she considered a good sign, as his volatile nature would have demanded a blow-up the moment he became aware. Subtlety never had been her brother's style.

She took her time to dress in a simple yellow frock and headed downstairs.

He sat alone in the breakfast room when she entered, and Jo noted his clenched jaw straight away. Hesitation slowed her down as his flashing eyes locked with hers. Something was amiss, and it had to have happened in the last hour.

"Hungry?" he asked, motioning for her to take a seat and barely restraining a growl.

Jo glanced at the table and the lack of breakfast.

"Not really," she hedged, but continued into the room when his gaze turned even darker. "It's early yet," she murmured, taking a seat across from him.

"You are probably curious why I requested your presence at this ungodly hour."

"A tad, yes."

A humorless laugh rumbled from his chest. "For an explanation, Josephine."

Jo gave her brother a confused stare. "I'm not sure I understand."

Brahm's brow furrowed. "Yesterday evening, the Middleton sisters accosted me." His shoulders shuddered before he continued, "I could not fathom why. I tolerated their incessant chatter when I recalled they are the cousins of your friend, Lady Belle. But all that aside, imagine my surprise when I woke up this morning to the noise of giggling women who'd invaded my house!"

Jo blinked.

"At first I thought it must be a dream, but again, imagine my surprise to find all three of them in the breakfast room. Eating *my* food, which they obviously found in the pantry, as though *my* house belonged to them, at this hour no less," he all but bellowed. "Then all three of them started batting their eyelashes at me. I've never been so scared in all my life."

Shocked, Jo struggled to contain her laughter as her brother continued, his brow wagging in true horror. "Then it struck me, is this not my sister's class of bandwagon trouble? If this is a ploy to distract me so you can bat your lashes at St. Aldwyn, it stops right now."

Jo's mouth dropped open. Had her brother lost his marbles? She carried no interest in St. Aldwyn. Granted, she found him more attractive than she ought to, but she was also guilty of thinking him nothing more than a shallow aristocrat. Like most rakes, he'd been spoiled by luxury and the continued attention of throngs of women.

In fact, the only reason she'd always tolerated his presence was because when he believed himself unobserved, his dark eyes turned broody and seemed to harbor a deep sadness. In those times when she glimpsed the true man behind the façade, she found herself being drawn into a maze of fascination. Knowledgeable of his past with Grey, aware he had done horrid things, her instincts flared to life at the sight of a wounded soul. She found she wanted to ease the bleak look from his eyes.

By all appearances it seemed he'd put his past behind him, but Jo gathered that guilt haunted him still. Yes, something shimmered in his eyes, something that made her insides flutter in the most unsettling way. Something she wasn't quite certain she liked.

"I have no interest in St. Aldwyn, other than remaining as far away from him as I possibly can," Jo replied with the truth.

Her brother seemed skeptical, however. "Why then, have you put those she-wolves on my track?"

Jo suppressed a smile. "I would never do such a cruel thing. The Middletons have always done as they please. And as I'm a friend of

their cousin, I am considered a friend to them. Only you never noticed before because it is only now that they are actively searching for husbands." A lie of course, though one may never be certain with those girls.

A noise, which sounded much like a wounded bear rumbled in her brother's chest. "Bloody hell, we need to leave London post-haste."

Jo scoffed. "I never thought I would see the day where my own brother could not manage a few marriage-minded misses."

He shot her a glare. "This is no joking matter."

"Of course it is. Did it never occur to you that you are a titled, bachelor, albeit an old one, and unmarried ladies would set you in their sights?"

He only grunted.

"Furthermore, have you not considered it's about time you marry and start a family? Produce an heir, continue the family bloodline?"

Her brother surged to his feet, his face purple with anger. "You would lecture *me* on marriage? You are so firmly set on the shelf that not even I could manage to procure you a suitable husband, and not to say that the only prospect you have is a rake with no interest in matrimony!"

Jo gasped. "I am unmarried by choice, you big oaf."

"So am I," Brahm shot back.

"I, on the other hand, do not need an heir to carry on the family line, dear brother. You've a duty to your ancestry and to your title, which you so conveniently like to forget."

"My duty? What about yours? You should have been married by now and given some lord an heir, not be running around London saving all the crippled old souls you manage to find!"

"How dare you, Brahm. I help people, which is more than I can say about you. All you do is growl and scowl at everyone who dares to cross your path. At least I have a purpose."

"I have a purpose, Josephine. My purpose is to remain unwed for as long as you do."

"You cannot be serious!" Jo gasped, shocked that her brother would take such a stand.

"I'm perfectly in earnest, my dear. If you will not marry, then I won't either. So I suggest you go and get rid of the Middletons in my drawing room before I throw them out."

"They are still here?" Jo asked, her eyes wide.

"I couldn't bloody well toss them out now, could I?" he snapped.

But Jo had already shot from her chair and marched out of the room without a word, so furious with her brother she wanted to scream. As fast as her legs could carry her without bursting into a run she hurried to the drawing room where Poppy, Holly and Willow

awaited her—with any luck not in tears. Brahm could be beyond rude when needed.

When Jo entered the drawing room, the girls stood together in a whispering debate, all three of them motioning wild gestures with their hands. Together they were a sight to behold, their energy noticeable even from afar.

Pretty in their own pixie-like way, they would not encounter much trouble finding husbands, provided they kept their mouths shut. And while they may look alike with their blonde hair and impish features, they each had different eye color.

Poppy's eyes boasted a deep shade of blue while Willow possessed eyes that reminded Josephine of green crystals. As for Holly, she had golden eyes, tiger like, which heightened the angles of her face. All in all, their eyes comprised their most distinguishable features. Yet still, most would just refer to them as the Middleton sisters, uncaring which was which.

“Jo!” Poppy exclaimed with merriment as she rushed toward her, enveloping Jo in her arms. “We’ve been waiting for you *forever*.”

“Surely not forever, as it’s only past six,” Jo replied with only a hint of sarcasm. Miraculous for her.

“It felt like forever,” Holly chirped.

Willow nodded. “What is with your bear of a brother growling at us?”

“You ate all his honey,” Jo murmured, amusement entering her face.

Poppy let out a loud snort.

“We only helped ourselves to some food,” Willow grumbled.

Holly bobbed her head up and down. The movement almost made Jo dizzy.

“We were famished and in a hurry to get here, it seemed pointless to stop and eat first, but then when we arrived, you weren’t awake yet.”

“Yes well, Londoners mostly keep town hours,” Jo pointed out.

“That’s just silly. You miss the best time of the day sleeping.”

Normally Jo wouldn’t agree, but then decided it was futile to argue with them. Being woken up by lively folk at six did not count for missing the best part of the day.

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?”

“It’s all part of our plan to aggravate your brother,” Poppy answered.

Holly bobbed her head. “Cousin Belle informed us you require assistance and of course we are happy to help,” she whispered in an excited voice.

“What exactly did Belle say?” Jo asked on her guard, refraining from pointing out they’d already started to assist her the previous evening.

“Oh, not much,” Willow said with bright spirits. “We are to give you a fair chance to win a wager by distracting certain parties who had developed stalking tendencies, as well as your brother.”

So everything then.

“I should warn you,” Jo felt compelled to say, “my brother is not about to tolerate you harassing him.”

“That is what we are counting on.”

Jo raised a skeptical brow, not certain how that would accomplish anything. Still she planted a warm smile on face. Brahm had meddled in her affairs countless of times, so why not meddle in his. If anything, he may even comprehend the need to marry and fulfill his duty.

“By all means,” Jo said, her eyes sparkling with mischief, “entertain me with your methods.”

“Oh, it will be tons of fun,” Holly said bouncing up and down.

“Just what do you plan to do to my dear unsuspecting brother?” Jo asked out of curiosity, settling in comfortably on the couch beside Willow.

“Oh you know,” Poppy said. “Distract him with our wiles.”

“And you believe flirtation will work?”

“Oh yes.” This from Holly. “We have the perfect plan.”

Jo laughed. “Which is?”

“It is well-advised that you not know the particulars,” Willow interjected. “Or so I’m told.”

“Belle advised you not to tell me?”

Her answer came in the form of three reddened cheeks. Jo shook her head at her friend’s attempt to keep her in the dark.

“Do you wish for us to work our wiles on any other gentleman?” Poppy asked, her impish smile full of mischief.

St. Aldwyn came to mind and Jo hesitated at the idea of any of these girls working their wiles on him, feeling yet ignoring the pinch of jealousy. He would not be a nuisance for this wager.

“No, my brother will be a hard enough shell to crack.”

“Oh, he won’t be able to escape our silliness.”

Jo stared at Holly, the youngest sister, not sure what to make of her. She seemed rather happy to be presented the opportunity to behave silly.

“What of your father? I hardly imagine he would approve of such behavior.”

“Do not worry on that account. He won’t even notice,” Willow replied with a wave of her hand.

“Very well, but have you considered that outlandish behavior might draw the attention of disapproving stares? It may hurt your reputations.”

All three sisters huffed.

Poppy leaned forward, as if she was about to part with a big secret. “For the most part, you are correct, but our silly behavior will be overlooked.”

“Oh?” Jo murmured curious. “How will you achieve such a feat?”

Willow smiled, answering, “Why, by pretending to be untamed country misses who do not know any better.”

“Ah, I see.”

“It’s brilliant!” Holly chirped, bouncing up and down in excitement. “Eyes will be glued on us, everyone waiting for our next faux pas. It will be like the lead act in a grand play.”

“Very well,” Jo said in a rather hesitant tone, “if you trust it will work then I give you my full support.”

Eyes alight with mischief the three sisters clapped their hands in excitement.

“We must write out our plan like a play!” Poppy suggested in glee.

Jo’s smile froze. Goodness, they weren’t jesting. They did consider this a grand play and themselves the leading actors.

“We can even rehearse our parts in the mornings!” Holly exclaimed.

Willow gleamed. “Excellent! How fun it will be to tease your brother and watch his face turn purple before his temper explodes and he bellows at the furniture. He will be one of the leading acts without even knowing!”

Jo chuckled, their laughter contagious. “Then I must thank you for assisting me, even though it is for some silly wager.”

“Think nothing of it,” Poppy said with a grin. “We were prepared to die of boredom, but you have given us the perfect opportunity to provoke some trouble. It’s so seldom we venture to London.”

Jo regarded the girls in amused consideration. “So you are not intent on following your cousin’s footsteps into spinsterhood?”

“Good heavens no!” Holly said with the same excitement she did everything else.

Willow just shook her head with a slight smile. Of the three sisters, she appeared to be the most level headed, Jo decided.

“I cannot wait to fall in love,” Poppy said on a dreamy note.

Willow cocked her head to the side. “My cousin will marry yet, I do not believe spinsterhood is her fate. Neither is yours.”

“You don’t?”

All three girls nodded. It would seem Jo had been the topic of

their discussion before. *Brats*. “I presume you believe I will be next to fall into the parson’s trap?”

Willow shrugged. “It is our view that our cousin will be the last to fall.”

Jo’s loud snort greeted their view. “I assure you, I have no intention of ever taking a husband.”

“You might not have a choice,” Poppy murmured. “This wager may yet leave you ruined.”

“Only if I get caught,” Jo snapped, annoyed by the direction of the conversation.

“Please do not think me presumptuous,” Poppy added hastily. “I do not believe you will get caught, but the possibility remains, and what Willow meant,” Poppy said giving her sister a pointed stare, “is she believes that all things happen in sets of three.”

Sets of three? Preposterous.

“I for one do not believe in such drivel. And even if I do get caught, which I will not, I have a plan.”

Still, odd as it may seem, Jo could not help but feel as though fate was conspiring against her. As though with this wager, she had put events into motion that would lay waste to her reputation or her life as she had come to enjoy it.

Jo shook her head, as if the act itself would erase her thoughts. Theatrical. All this talk about acting and playwriting had made her melodramatic. Fate would not plot against her. In fact, the only person who might find it in his mind to collude against her in such a nefarious way would be her brother, but he was not one for diabolical scheming.

“It remains pointless to run from fate. We will just have to wait to see what it has in store for us,” Willow said wisely.

Yes, she was by far the most levelheaded of the three, even though she was the second born.

“Well, perhaps fate will allow me to win the wager.”

And Jo did wish to win. Years ago, she’d been courted once. He’d never kissed her, but she allowed him to steal her heart and shatter it to pieces. It had been in that moment of devastating pain—pain only made worse by the fact that she lost something she realized she never had to begin with—that Jo vowed she would never let any man have that kind of power over her again. With this wager, she remained in control, with no chance of her heart being led astray.

A sudden sound akin to a caged animal stomping past the drawing room (one growling about females and suffocation) gave them pause. A smile tugged at Jo’s lips by the time they heard a door slam shut.

“Well, we have accomplished what we set out to do,” Poppy

murmured and Jo laughed at the glint in the girl's eye, her spirits high for the rest of the day.

Chapter 4

Lady Josephine arrived at the Wynter's Ball on her brother's arm promptly at midnight. The event was in full swing and indeed, a crush. Jo always preferred to arrive early at such gatherings, not because she deemed it to be good manners, but she enjoyed observing her peers as they arrived. Tonight, however, was the exception. She wished to make an entrance with her latest Madam De La Frey gown.

Earlier this evening, Jo had hesitated when she saw the rich violet silk spread out over her bed. A symbol of elegance and grace. Draped over her curves, it complimented her feminine shape, hinting at seductive temptation. The lustrous fabric glinted, reflecting the light of the ballroom, and adding to her appeal. Cut low, the luring skin promised to draw appreciative stares.

Jo felt naked beneath the eyes that penetrated her, including that of her brother, whose face turned four shades of red when he caught sight of her, his eyes nearly popping out of his head. She would have had a devil of a time keeping her brother from dragging her home if not for Poppy Middleton, who suddenly appeared at her side.

"It's about time you arrived. I had begun to think your brother may have locked you in his dungeon."

Brahm's face mottled even more before he stomped away without a word.

"How rude!" Poppy exclaimed.

Jo laughed, taking Poppy by the arm. "My brother does not have a dungeon."

"That you know of," Poppy said with a saucy grin.

Jo led them into the throng, examining the crowd for familiar faces. "Do you think he noticed my entrance?"

Poppy snorted. "My dear, every gentleman in attendance noticed your entrance—even Craven. But that's not all. The Marquis of St. Aldwyn's jaw practically dropped to the ground when he caught sight of you descending the stairs. Then his face scrunched together in the most unhandsome way."

"Oh dear," Jo murmured with a frown. If Craven asked her to dance, as Belle predicted he would, St. Aldwyn may get it into his head to meddle in her affairs.

"I will put Willow on St. Aldwyn's tailcoats. She will distract him, but to be honest, we may have trouble distracting that one."

Jealousy reared its ugly head, but Jo tamped it down, annoyed she should even contend with such emotion. He meant nothing to her, so why should she be jealous if Willow batted her eyes his way?

"It's this dress. It's cut too damn low."

Poppy chuckled at her use of language. "You should have seen his expression."

The corners of Jo's lips turned upward. It was a pleasant picture, in her current mood.

"How does your brother manage to keep all the gents at bay with one look?" Poppy asked, a little in awe.

"It's a terrifying look," Jo admitted as her gaze darted to her sibling. He made an intimidating figure with his dark scowl always in place. Gentlemen tended to be wary of his temper and reputable fighting skills, while the ladies fled at the sight of his heated glare (and her brother glared a lot). The result being people avoided him whenever possible. He appeared much too doom and gloom for his tender age of twenty-seven. But behind his hard exterior, a man of great passion existed.

"Where's your cousin?" Jo asked, her gaze seeking her friend.

"Oh, she's ogling the object of your wager."

"How...like Belle."

"You must recount all the details of his kiss when you win. I wish for nothing more than to be kissed by a rake."

"If he even asks me to dance," Jo muttered.

"Oh he will, I have no doubt, if not tonight then the next."

It must be tonight. Or Madam De La Frey may remove even more material from her next gown.

"Do not look now," Poppy whispered urgently, "but Craven is making his way toward us."

The girl's face flushed with excitement and Jo's heart fluttered in her chest. This was it. "Has anyone else noticed?"

"No, Willow has maneuvered St. Aldwyn so that his back is facing us and Holly, well, I do not know what Holly is doing but your brother has just fled in the opposite direction. Holy saints, is she yelling his name?"

A syrupy string of laughter filled the air as Jo saw Holly running after her brother, and indeed, calling out his name. Oh, what she would give to see her brother's face.

A sudden thought occurred to her and she grabbed Poppy's arm in a tight grip. "I haven't been introduced to the Earl yet."

"What?" Poppy asked confused, her gaze still trained on her sister's crescendo of catastrophe.

"He is heading our way and Lady Wynter is not accompanying him. Every pair of eyes will be drawn in our direction."

Poppy waved a dismissing hand. "They will believe you have been introduced at some point. There is no reason for them to suspect otherwise."

"Everyone except my brother," Jo muttered.

She hadn't given much thought to how Craven might approach her, only assumed that he would. Jo must have done a better job with her smolder than she suspected.

"Just remember, you are a woman of the night."

"I am no such thing, Poppy!"

"If he believed that, he would not be approaching you."

Poppy was right. A man of his stature and reputation would not be approaching her if he perceived her to be a simpering virginal miss. A truth proven when she found herself gazing up into a pair of icy blue eyes, so cold she would describe them as the devil's eyes, though they were set in an angel's face. For one brief moment, Jo forgot to breathe, but then she recalled she was supposed to be intriguing and mysterious—a woman of the night, as Poppy put it. In her best attempt yet, she plastered a coy smile on her face. With the slight upward curve of one side of her mouth, she remained silent, deciding it best to say nothing.

"Lady Josephine, may I have the pleasure of this dance?" His voice was a soft rumble in his chest.

Her breath hitched in her throat when his eyes boldly roamed over her face before settling on her exposed skin. He held his arm out for her and Jo sent up a short prayer for her salvation. Because no force, no matter how big, would stop her brother from dragging her home if he witnessed her dance with Craven.

She did not answer, there was no need, only took his arm and let him lead her to the dance floor, where the orchestra had started a waltz. Over the years she had danced the waltz plenty of times, but in Craven's arms the sensation felt wicked and sinful. She did not dare peer at anyone except him, mainly because she could not escape those mesmerizing eyes. She could feel the stares of curious onlookers on her back, hear the whispers and titters spread like a wild fire through the ballroom. At least, that is what Jo imagined she heard. She ought to kiss him right now, for after this dance she may never have the opportunity again.

Craven pulled her a fraction closer than propriety allowed, his eyes taking on a seductive glint. Jo recognized trouble when she saw it and if ever there was a man not to get embroiled with, even for one kiss, it would be him.

Now or never, Josephine.

"While I admit your attention is flattering, my lord, I am somewhat surprised by it," Jo murmured in what she hoped to be a husky voice.

She couldn't tell whether her body "made love" to his as Belle so ridiculously suggested she should do, but it did not matter all that much. She had his undivided attention.

His eyes were hooded as he regarded her before he said, "After the way you devoured me with your gaze Lady Josephine, you can hardly be all that surprised."

A smile touched her lips. "Devoured, my lord?"

"Do not play coy, Josephine, and call me Lucien."

Every bone in her body quivered at the use of her Christian name. How utterly improper!

"I do not play coy, *Lucien*, and while I admit your physical form is something to be admired, I never had any intention to pursue my fantasies."

His eyes widened but a fraction, but Jo noted it with satisfaction. Who would have imagined she would be so good at flirtation?

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

His voice had taken on a seductive tone, causing Jo's mouth to run dry. "Perhaps," she whispered, her gaze purposefully lowering to his mouth as her tongue darted out to line her upper lip. She was satisfied only when she heard his intake of breath.

"Is that so?"

Her eyes sparkled as she stared up at him. "Simply for a kiss."

"I am intrigued by your daring, my lady, but how, may ask, will you achieve such a feat?"

A throaty laugh masked her surprise at his answer. What a perplexing man, that he would make her spell it out. "I will begin by luring you outside to the gardens."

A smile tugged at his lips, his eyes alight with devilry. "Oh? And how will you manage that?" he asked with keen interest.

"I won't need to manage it, Lucian."

"Why is that?"

"You will follow me out, even if it is just out of curiosity."

"With St. Aldwyn lurking in the shadows, are you sure?"

Jo gave him a droll stare. "Noticed that?"

"My dear, I doubt there is a person in attendance that hasn't. They would have to be blind or not overly bright."

A nonchalant shrug met his answer. "It is unfortunate the marquis has taken it upon himself to save society from my ministrations."

"And what ministrations would that be?"

She leaned into him, her eyes gleaming. "I would tell you my lord, but then I would have to kidnap you. No telling what may happen to you after that."

He rewarded her with a chuckle, his voice amused when he said, "If you do manage to lure me to the gardens, what are your plans? Do I need to fear for my life?"

"Well, being the blackguard that I am, and you being a man alone in the gardens, I will certainly take advantage of you."

His lips quirked. "What a monster you are, my lady."

"I prefer scoundrel."

"A rake pursued by a scoundrel. The gossip rags will eat it up like butter cake."

"Quite the understatement, I'm sure."

Heat warmed her cheeks when he stared at her with those hawkish eyes of his. Could he see through her pretense? Was it even pretense anymore?

"This is a dangerous game you are playing, Josephine."

Her amused gaze locked with his heated one. "I could say I do not play games, Lucien, but I'm enjoying myself too much to lie," she murmured, causing another chuckle to rumble in his throat.

He twirled her quite suddenly and Jo had to suppress the bout of merry laughter wanting to burst from her chest. It had been too long since she last danced.

"Why have you never married?"

"I've no interest in marriage," Jo answered, still caught up in the rhythm of their bodies moving together.

"So you would not consider becoming my wife?"

"I would run screaming for the hills."

The rich sound of his laughter drew curious eyes from onlookers. It was so contagious in fact that soon Jo found herself wearing a silly grin. It was then, with a belated sense of awareness, that she realized he'd steered them toward the French doors. She resisted the urge to peek back and forth in a sudden surge of nervous tension.

I am a lady of the night, she repeated in her head over and over until calm settled over her.

"Would I make such a terrible husband?" he murmured over her head, his eyes examining the crowd.

"My aversion is not to you, but marriage itself."

"Does that surly brother of yours share your view?"

"On the contrary, it gives him heart palpitations."

That seemed to amuse him. "He would not force you?"

Jo's sigh was one of dramatic fashion. "He may yet, but I like to believe that he knows me well enough that forcing marriage upon me would only result in his utter embarrassment."

"Indeed?"

"We all have our secrets."

"Perhaps I will coax some of those secrets from of you," he drawled with a lazy smile, giving Jo the impression of a cat eyeing the cream.

"I do not part so easily with mine."

They reached the French doors as those words left her lips and Jo hid her nervousness behind an arched brow.

A mocking smile stretched across his face, daring her to refuse his obvious offer to take a stroll in the garden. With a small smile she stepped onto the terrace, his hand on the small of her back as he led her into the gardens for her very first kiss.

From a distance, Damien set course directly across the ballroom, following the most beautiful and infuriating woman known to man. Or just to him.

She currently hung on the arm of Craven and Damien had to tamp down the urge to yank her away from the devil. When he first spied Craven approaching Lady Josephine and Miss Middleton, he thought his mind was playing tricks on him. What the hell was wrong with the chit? Craven would never approach a lady without provocation. He also refrained from consorting with proper ladies. Which meant Lady Josephine was up to no good. Again.

He made a mental note to apologize to the other Middleton chit, who he left without even a by your leave, when he spotted Lady Josephine dancing her way to the French doors with Craven.

Once at the doors, he hesitated only long enough to take note if anyone witnessed his pursuit. Someone apparently had. Another Middleton sister appeared by his side, or was it the same one he had left moments ago?

“My lord, what a pleasant surprise.”

Not the same one, then. Damien stared at her unmoving. Surprise? She had practically leaped in his way, distracting him from his task.

Distracting.

Of course.

In a ploy to intimidate the small waif-like creature he narrowed his eyes coldly. “You would not be trying to prevent me from withdrawing outside, would you, little girl?”

Her eyes widened to saucers. “Why ever would I do that, my lord?”

He took a menacing step forward, but noted she held firm. “I don’t take well to being made a fool.”

Damien did not wait for her reply but stepped out onto the terrace, brushing her aside. As he proceeded down the steps, he barely noticed the flickering light of the lanterns across certain parts of the garden, meant to give one the impression of magical woods. He was not in a magical mood.

Instinct led him down the garden path and around the giant Medusa garden statue. He had brought countless women to many gardens for a bit of dallying, so he had no doubt he would find her. Yet, for a moment, he thought his instinct proved wrong. Then upon

hearing faint, hardly discernable voices, he knew it had not and picked up his pace.

Perhaps, he bitterly considered, it would serve the chit right to find herself married off to a bastard like Craven. But the mere thought made him want to kill someone.

Just then, he turned another corner and saw Lady Josephine, standing with her back toward him. The pair stood too close for his comfort, discussing something in low, whispering voices, oblivious to his approach.

Without warning and to Damien's horror, Lady Josephine lifted herself up on to her toes as Craven leaned forward, almost pressing up against her. They were going to kiss.

Over his dead body!

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Damien drawled, not able to stop the edge from entering his voice.

He watched with satisfaction as the little lady whirled to face him, shock clearly etched into her fine features. Craven, on the other hand, only lifted a mocking brow, as if the bastard had expected his arrival.

The object of his frustration straightened. "Lucien and I were enjoying a breath of fresh air. Were you following us?"

Lucien, was it? He did not miss her fingers grip her gown.

"I suggest you not try my patience any further tonight," Damien said to Lady Josephine before he settled his gaze on Craven. "I recommend you leave."

The rotter actually had the gall to chuckle and take Josephine's hand in his, lifting it to his lips. "Until tomorrow, Lady Jo."

His whisper had been loud enough for Damien to overhear before he disappeared into the darkness. The man obviously possessed a death wish.

Those green cat eyes locked with his.

"What the devil are you up to?" Damien growled. "Have you no care for your reputation? Is that it? Men like Craven devour little virgins like you for breakfast."

"One may say the same about you."

Damien shoved his arm her way. "Come," he gritted. "I shall see you safely inside where you will stay out of bloody trouble."

She shot him a look that expressed deviance.

"Take it," he snapped.

Something in his gaze must have convinced her for she seized his arm, almost stumbling to keep pace with his longer strides. Damien did not slow, but instead more or less dragged her back up the garden path, stopping only when they were well within view of the ballroom.

"While I suppose I should thank you, I find myself resenting your

interference,” she remarked once they stopped.

“Why are you trying to seduce Craven?”

“Why did you follow me?” she shot back.

“I am not the concern here, you are.”

“Good heavens St. Aldwyn, it was just a little flirtation,” she said, her tone mocking. “I daresay there is nothing wrong with that.”

“There is when it’s Craven you are consorting with.”

A loud snort was her answer. “Why are you stalking me?”

“I am not stalking you,” Damien snapped. “I happened to notice your departure and prevented your ruination. Not that your lackeys did not try to stop me. They failed horrendously.”

Was it his imagination or was that satisfaction that shone in her gaze? It was gone before he could blink.

“Whether or not I am ruined is none of your concern, so you can stop following me about.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed on her, no detail too small to hide from his gaze. From the slight crease in her brow to her stiff posture, his eyes took it all in. She seemed to enjoy tormenting him.

“You are right, of course. You are not my duty,” he returned. “But if you do feel the need to seduce someone, you might as well seduce me.”

He had shocked her with his words. Those luscious lips parted ever so slightly and her cat eyes widened only faintly before a mischievous smile tugged at her mouth.

“An intriguing offer, my lord, but as you can see, I have set my sights on someone else.”

“So set them on me.”

“No.”

Instinct warned there was more to this than she let on, but jealousy threatened to lay waste to any good intentions. He tamped it down. “Do you know what Craven is, Lady Josephine?” he finally asked.

“Oh, for pity’s sake,” she snapped, defiance once again flashing in her green eyes. “The man’s a notorious rake, I am well aware. But on the other hand, so are you—and yet here I stand, perfectly safe.”

“If that is what you believe,” his voice quiet and low, “you are sorely mistaken. Craven is not just a notorious rake. He’ll take what he desires and toss you to the wolves. And for your information, you have never been safe with me,” his warm breath caressed her cheek as he took a step closer, “you will never be safe with me.”

Jo stared up into the handsome face of St. Aldwyn, her feeble knees weakening at his admission. Hell’s bells, what this man could do to her without so much as a touch was nothing short of alarming.

Summoning every bit of self-control she possessed, she willed her face devoid of expression.

“You do not scare me.”

“Liar, but rest assured I’ve no intention of kissing you, at least not yet.” As if his words weren’t infuriating enough, the rogue had the audacity to wink.

“I have no interest in kissing you,” Jo replied flatly.

His gaze bore into hers for several more unnerving seconds. Then his eyes narrowed to slits. “You are up to something.”

In spite of her surprise, she mentally patted herself on the shoulder for remaining unaffected by those heated eyes. He may be able to unnerve her with his raw masculinity, but she would not let him get the better of her.

“I’m not sure I follow, my lord.”

“You all have that gleam in your eyes. Trouble, it is.”

“You are mistaken.”

“I can also tell a lie when I hear one.” His dark eyes seemed to burrow right into her soul. “What mischief are you plotting?”

Jo had to remind herself that he could not possibly know about their wager. “I’m sure I do not know what you mean.”

His expression remained inscrutable and Jo cursed her lack of ability to read him as easily as he apparently read her. He leaned closer. Mere inches separated them now.

“As a gentleman, it is my duty to see that you are not taken advantage of by the likes of Craven.”

“You are a lord, not a gentleman. And even if I were up to something, it would only stand to reason you are in no position to allow or refuse me anything.”

“No?” His gaze flicked to her lips. “Yet, everything you do interests me. And I wish to know why you chose him, Josephine.”

Tiny prickles of awareness coated her skin at the use of her name. It sounded intimate and wicked rolling from his tongue and Jo could not deny that Craven did not have quite the same effect on her as St. Aldwyn. But she could hardly tell him of the wager for he would never let it go.

“If you must know, there is a certain air of danger surrounding Craven that I find most appealing.”

“Am I not dangerous enough?”

Jo thought it wise to remain silent.

Savage eyes stared back at her. “I wonder what your dear ignorant brother would say of your latest attempt at trouble.”

“I suppose he may be grateful that the *honorable* Marquis of St. Aldwyn took it upon himself to inform him of my latest escapade. It will certainly raise my estimation of your air of danger if you tell my

brother.”

“Be careful, Lady Josephine. I will only tolerate so much from you.”

“You seem to forget, my lord, you are in no position to tolerate anything from me. Please remember that the next time you consider meddling in my affairs,” Jo snapped, parting on him a murderous glare before she stomped back to the ballroom. The nerve of that man! Why she fancied herself attracted to him in the first place was beyond her understanding. He was insufferable and she would not let him get in the way of her winning this wager.

Chapter 5

The following night, the unfortunate marriage of Lady Constance to the merchant Mr. Cartwright was the whisper on everyone's lips. Damien noted this as he straightened his coat and strolled into the ballroom of Lord and Lady Wycombe. Almost every woman in attendance stole glances at him, tittering behind their fans, no doubt gossiping the latest gossip. His lip curled in disgust. He hated gossip. The only reason he attended this blasted affair instead of drinking himself into oblivion was the same reason that had haunted his sleep last night.

She was up to something—and what better way to pass the time than get to the bottom of it? In fact, he deemed it his gentlemanly duty to put a stop to whatever she had planned with Craven. Ladies did not go about gallivanting in the gardens and venturing off into the darkness, kissing depraved rakes. Well, not Lady Josephine, and not without him.

"Your expression is distressingly dour," a voice drawled. Westfield came up beside him, his gaze never leaving the crowd.

"She's up to something," Damien muttered, watching Josephine mooning over Craven.

"Who?"

"Not just who, all of them! Look at them, huddled in the corner conspiring."

"Who is conspiring?" Westfield asked again.

"Lady Josephine and her band of conspirators," Damien muttered, motioning to the ladies in question.

Westfield raised a thick blond brow. "When are they not conspiring? Besides, why do you care what marry minded misses are up to?"

Damien glared at his friend.

Westfield was right of course. What had started as a fairly innocent observation had developed into a full blown obsession. An obsession with one woman. *One woman*. That had been all it took. Damn it all.

"If I recall correctly, this all started with your mad scheme to see your sister wed. I wanted no part it," Damien pointed out.

"Evelyn has married and yet, here you are."

"That woman has put a spell on me. Why else would I be obsessed with her?"

"Why else indeed."

Damien rolled his eyes. If Westfield's mind was a maze of crackers, where exactly did that leave him?

He drew in a deep breath while searching the room for Lady Josephine, who had disappeared from the group. He leaned against the wall behind him. The drawing room grew more populated with each passing minute, which made it easy for her to disappear into the crowd.

Clearly, he had gone mad.

Ah, his gaze found her amidst the throng. A startling vision, swathed in scarlet silk, the swell of her breast gleamed in the candle light. He could not manage to remove his gaze from her as she drifted to the center of the room, drawing the attention of every damn man in her vicinity. He shook his head; to be sure she was actually there.

Then his heart nearly ceased to beat as he watched her saunter up to Craven, whisper something in his ear and walk away toward the open doors leading to the gardens. A minute later Craven followed.

Damien gaped in astonishment. "Is she bloody mad?"

Westfield, who had followed his gaze, whistled. "Craven, heh? I say we kill him and be done with it."

Damien turned his furious gaze to Westfield. "Love to, but he has not done anything wrong."

"I suppose we shall have to settle for maiming then."

The idea held some definite merit. Had she learned nothing from the previous evening? His gaze flickered to the crowd, certain the exchange had been noticed, but oddly enough, no one seemed to have seen it, much less noted their departure. What in the blazes was wrong with these people? All their attention was riveted on—he turned his head to the current commotion—Miss Middleton? The chit waved her arms wildly about in the direction of Warton, Lady Josephine's brother. Had she just jumped up and down?

Realization struck, hard and fast. The Middletons were aiding Lady Josephine in her path to ruin.

Damien pushed away from the wall and set a course directly across the ballroom, leaving Westfield behind. He ignored anyone who attempted to gain his attention, following Josephine and the soon-to-be dead man, all the while keeping his gaze trained on Craven's back.

At the doors, he hesitated only long enough to see if a Middleton would appear, before slipping through once again. He did not need an audience for the crime he was about to commit.

Josephine followed Craven deeper into the gardens, elated that tonight she would finally receive her long-awaited first kiss. Craven had been sending heated glances her way all night and the thrill of being the object of his desire felt exhilarating.

He led her around a curve and suddenly there were no more lanterns, the gardens plunged into darkness. She barely had time to

recognize her surroundings before she was pushed up against a wall, steel arms around her waist.

Oh my.

His gaze bore into her only for a second before it dropped to linger on her lips, only to settle on her exposed skin. A rush of excitement shot up her body. No man has ever looked at her with such desire. Well, perhaps St. Aldwyn, but he did not count. She preferred to be a lady of the night than a mouse being stalked by a predator.

“What. Do. You. Want. From me?” His voice came out harsh, causing little tremors to run down her spine.

“A kiss,” she whispered in a voice that belonged to the temptress she pretended to be. To demonstrate, she flicked her tongue over lower lip.

“Is that all you want from me, Lady Jo?”

“Yes.”

Lucien’s smile turned predatory as he said, “We shall see,” before his lips came crushing down on hers. The action was so unexpected Jo gasped at the touch of his mouth closing on hers. He took advantage of her surprise and let his tongue caress her parted lips. Hesitant at first, Jo mimicked his action with her tongue, causing him to deepen the kiss with a growl.

Suddenly the kiss stopped and Jo nearly groaned in protest before the sound of flesh pounding flesh brought her out of her reverie. Her first thought was that her brother had found them, but upon opening her eyes she realized it was none other than the Marquis of St. Aldwyn. And he was in a killing rage.

His fist pounded in to Craven.

Jo watched in horror as the two men rolled around on the ground, fists flying and curses ringing in her ears.

“Stop it! Both of you!” Jo demanded after her initial shock wore off.

“Stay out of this Lady Jo,” Craven said, as his fist connected with a solid blow to St. Aldwyn’s jaw.

“Yes, stay out of this *Lady Jo*,” St. Aldwyn mocked as he double punched Craven in the ribs.

Jo threw her hands in the air. “This is ridiculous!” she shouted as she stalked away. She would rather not be anywhere near Damien when they finally finished brawling.

“Come back here, Josephine!”

Jo picked up her pace when she heard Damien curse. Just a few more yards and she would...

Strong fingers gripped her arm in a steely vise, halting her escape back to safety.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Tiny prickles of awareness coated her skin. He whirled her around as his voice scorched her. His eyes glinted in furious accusation.

"I am going back inside," Jo said, calmly tucking away a stray curl. "My brother will be searching for me."

"Your brother can damn well wait. You and I need to straighten a few things out."

"There is nothing to straighten out. Where is Lucien?" she asked, her gaze darting back the way she came.

A tick in his jaw alerted her to danger, but he only shrugged. "Probably still where I left him."

Her hands moved to her hips. "You had no right to interfere. If I want to kiss Craven, I will damn well kiss Craven!"

"Like hell you will!" he growled, his fingers digging into her arms.

"You are hurting me," Jo said and his grip turned gentle, yet remained unrelenting. As if she would bolt if he let go.

"I thought I made it clear. If you wish to seduce someone, I am more than happy to accommodate you."

Defiance set strongly in her features. "Why? You have never shown any interest in me before now."

He seemed to take his time to answer her question. Calculating every thought, every answer. Jo waited patiently, aware that a man like Damien would say no more than he needed to and would never be caught in anything that resembled a trap.

"You have never been in the market for a lover. Believe me, Lady Josephine, if I had known, I would have been first in line." His voice was hoarse with the soft purr of seduction.

She had not expected such an answer and her eyes widened in surprise. Was it possible that the only reason for his continued interference in her life was because he desired to bed her? Goodness! She would have to set him straight on that account.

"As it so happens, I'm not in the market for a lover. I was, however, in the market for a first kiss, which I now have received."

Jo felt rather than saw the change in his demeanor and took a step back. She had not known it was possible to anger him even more.

Jealousy, hard and unpleasant, pulsed through Damien's veins, causing every muscle in his body to tense. His lips curled into a snarl. He wanted to go back and hunt Craven down. But the problem lied not with Craven, but the vexing lady scowling up at him, her eyes alight with fire. His reaction, he told himself, was purely based on the fact that she'd chosen Craven above him. The thought left a bitter

taste in his mouth.

"You planned this," he stated, recalling the Middletons' antics. It was all so Lady Josephine may sneak away for her first kiss. "Why?"

"It was a wager, if you must know," she replied, her eyes spitting fire at him.

"A wager? You would throw yourself to the wolves for a wager?" he growled, astonished by her recklessness and furious he had not been her choice.

"Oh, for pity's sake, you forget who you are talking to," she said on a huff. "I risk my reputation every day for my charities, as you are well aware. A kiss is the least of my worries."

"Did you select the choice of gentleman, Josephine?" he asked in a soft whisper. "Or was he part of the wager?"

Damien watched as she closed her eyes. In defeat? Or annoyance? It mattered not. He would not stop until he had an answer.

"No, I did not choose him."

"Would he have been your choice?"

Her lips parted on a sigh before she answered. "I suppose not, but it's a moot point now. I won."

"A man like Craven will never be satisfied with one kiss but he will not get another, not as long as I'm still breathing. You and I on the other hand," he said leaning closer to her, "that is another story all together."

Jo almost collapsed at his suggestive tone and had to summon what little self-control she had left to not lean into him. Why must he be the one her traitorous body reacted to? Had she done something to offend the fates? Because by saints, this man, luckily unbeknown to him, held too much power over her.

"As I've said, I'm not in the market for a lover."

His eyes bore into hers for several unnerving seconds and a feeling of foreboding rippled down Jo's spine. A familiar spark entered his eyes and his demeanor took on a deceptively relaxed pose before he replied, "I plan to seduce you anyway."

Jo's mouth dropped open at his declaration. It was too ridiculous to contemplate. She and St. Aldwyn? Preposterous. Yet, in no way would she be able to resist him. Not since she had secretly fantasized about kissing him.

"I assure you, my lord, you will not succeed." Even though her voice had been calm, her panic started to rise.

"Call me Damien. It's far too late for propriety now, my dear."

"Where you are concerned, it is never too late."

The simple fact was, she could not afford to get distracted by him. He was too dangerous where her heart and her body were concerned.

She needed to remain detached and she needed to remind herself that, like Craven, he was a rake.

He stepped even closer—mere inches separated them now. “Stay away from Craven, Josephine. I meant what I said about what would happen if I find the two of you alone together again.”

“So you are allowed to attempt to seduce me but Craven is not?”

“Yes.”

“I think not, my lord. You have made your intentions clear, now let me make mine. I will kiss whoever I like and you cannot stop me.”

He stiffened. “Do you plan to kiss him again?”

Silence greeted his question.

“Stop looking at me like I stole your bonnet and tell me the damn truth,” he demanded.

“No,” she replied stubbornly.

He stared at her for a long moment. “All of that,” he waved his hands mockingly, “...for a wager? No, you are up to something else.” A hard edge had entered his voice.

Josephine gaped at him in astonishment. He did not believe her? The man could be so exasperating. She set her hands on her hips. “I won’t take this from the likes of you. I have told you the truth. You can ask Belle.”

“Oh? I take it Lady Belle is responsible for the poor choice of candidate? Did you enjoy kissing Craven, Josephine? Did you enjoy having his body pressed up against yours?”

Jo panicked. It was not the note of danger in his voice that made her turn and flee toward the doors that held safety, but the gleam in his eyes. Too late she remembered his grip on her arm and within seconds she found herself pressed up against his rock hard chest.

“Answer me dammit!”

“Unhand me!”

“No.”

“Please, let me go,” she pleaded as she pushed against his chest to no avail. His hold on her only tightened.

“First tell me if you enjoyed—”

“Why?” she hissed and pushed harder.

“Lower your voice, or do you want us to be found, alone?”

Her struggles ceased and her voice calmed when she said, “Unhand me or I *will* scream, and not only will we be found, but you will find yourself married to me before the week is out.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. Even though after my brother warned me to stay away from you, he would still demand marriage or your head.”

That seemed to amuse him and his voice held a note of curiosity when he said, “Your brother warned you to stay away from me?”

"Yes," she said with a nod. "No need to sound so pleased. Your attention has not gone unnoticed."

He waved her comment aside. "Your brother is a smart man."

"Apparently. Now release me, please."

"Very well."

And just like that he released her. Jo relaxed her stiff shoulders. If she could be certain of one thing, it was of Damien's aversion to marriage and commitments.

"Are you going to scream or shall I?"

She gasped, her eyes widening as she stared at him as he traced the lines of her hand with his finger. Her breath caught in her throat. Not certain what to do in the wake of that outlandish statement, Jo remained still. Then he leaned forward, setting his lips to the delicate pulse on her wrist.

"They say you must try everything at least once," he whispered against her skin.

Jo tugged her hand out of his with a start when his words penetrated through her fog-filled mind.

"You cannot be serious? Marriage is not something you try, and your aversion to any sort of commitment is a well-known fact. I am concerned you have finally lost your marbles. That can be the only explanation for this madness."

Displeasure darkened his handsome features. "Perhaps I have."

"No." She pressed her hands together. "I do not believe you're as bad as you would have everybody believe. You can be quite gentlemanly if the occasion calls for it."

"I suppose I should be flattered," he said, his voice dripping with disgust.

"Yes well," she looked away. "Be that as it may, I'm not like the other ladies you consort with. I will not be seduced by you."

"Yet you would go off with a notorious rake for a midnight *rendezvous*?"

Jo felt her face redden with a mortifying blush. He was right. Normally she would never behave in such a scandalous fashion for the attention of a man. But if she was honest with herself, she'd been disappointed that her first kiss had ended so abruptly. She sensed there should have been more. Of course she would never tell him that.

"Lucian was a wager, nothing more," she stated as a matter of fact.

"Still Lucian, is it?" he drawled, something dark flickering in his eyes. "Astonishing how you can call that lecher by this first name but not spare me a kiss."

Jo's blush deepened. She was in over her head but could not back down now. "I have already won my wager, but if it will stop your

pursuit of me, you may have your kiss,” she blurted, shocked at her own words.

Eyes narrowing on her, he moved closer until once again she was pressed up against his chest. Then his head lowered and his mouth covered hers. His lips were soft and gentle, not at all what Jo expected, though she'd never expected to be kissed by him. It was... scintillating. Her lips tingled as he worked his magic and a burst of passion erupted low in her chest. She pressed closer to him. Curious, she looped her arms around his neck, bringing him closer, and that appeared to be all encouragement he needed to deepen the kiss. His tongue plunged into her mouth, taking her to new heights of pleasure, and the hard ridge of his manly part pressed against her, proof of his desire. She gasped at the sensation, which quickly turned into a groan of yearning when his hands ran down her spine, cupping her *derrière* and pressing her closer to him. Then just as abruptly he broke away from her with a torturous groan, his rapid breathing matching that of her own.

“Bloody hell.”

Indeed.

She whirled around, certain now more than ever that she needed to stay as far away from him as she possibly could. In an attempt to dissuade him from pursuing her she threw over her shoulder, “And by the by, you should take a clue from Craven in the kissing department.”

She lifted her skirts and ran when she noted his face turn thunderous and he took a threatening step forward. She did not see the predatory smile stretch slowly across his face. Yes, she would pay for that comment.

Chapter 6

On the corner of some dirty wretched street, Lady Josephine and Lady Belle awaited the giant, James Shaw. The street bustled with the activity of unsavory characters. But by far the most disturbing were the poor, hopeless souls, wandering about with no direction or purpose. A twinge of guilt pinched in her heart for being born privileged, as it always happened in the presence of these people. She shook her head, ridding herself of her maudlin thoughts.

James had sent a note calling for an urgent meeting, yet he hadn't mentioned the reason, which according to Jo meant only one thing—it would most certainly be dangerous and would rely on their discretion. Just the kind of project she preferred.

She'd met James Shaw and his brother, Derek, four years ago when she created her first charity to help young orphaned boys. Like her, they also aided orphans, and when they approached her with a most intriguing proposition, she could not refuse. Their assistance, however, extended more in the way of perilous endeavors, like kidnapping and smuggling people out of the country. Her charities provided the perfect front for their activities and in return, Jo had found her purpose. And though tainted by their black reputations, they remained good men.

"You do realize of course," Belle commented in a dry voice, "that Evelyn will have a conniption if she learns we excluded her from this meeting."

Jo shrugged. While she loved Evelyn, the moment she married Grey, she became answerable to him, and a disadvantage to them. "She will understand."

"I feel guilt expand in my chest," Belle said, a hand clutched over her heart. "I hate guilt. It's such a distasteful emotion."

"Oh do not be so dramatic, is Westfield still bothering you?"

"An understatement."

Jo considered mentioning she had won the wager, to distract her friend, but found no words formed. She'd feel compelled to admit she'd kissed St. Aldwyn too and she wasn't ready to acknowledge what had transpired two nights ago.

Oh bother! Now he engulfed her mind. She half expected him to jump from the shadows, once again catching her in a place she was not supposed to be.

"Where is James?" Jo muttered under her breath.

"Has this elusive brother of his returned yet?" Belle asked.

"No, though he is expected back in a week or so."

Her friend nodded. "So the outcome of this project depends on us. Now there's a scary prospect."

Jo shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips. Derek Shaw brought a certain quality to their group that produced results. Without him, well not to say they would not succeed, but their chances diminished some.

"I daresay we are competent to complete this project on our own," Jo murmured, surveying the area for any sign of James. "For one thing, we have your cousins to distract unwanted parties."

"I do not understand why they decided to take it upon themselves to act as our guardians."

Jo sighed, she knew exactly why. "They are men and are of the opinion that as women all we must do is drink tea and gossip over the latest fashions."

"How ridiculous."

Jo nodded. "Heaven forbid we do not satisfy their unending wishes and paltry needs."

Belle chuckled, but clamped her mouth shut when she drew the attention of two men nearby. "Regardless, I want nothing to do with those wretched men."

"I agree, but as they have taken it upon themselves to meddle in our lives, we shall have to deal with it smartly, or we may end up married to one of them."

Belle visibly shivered. "Marriage? The thought gives me the willies."

Jo chuckled. "If the notion of being married to Westfield gives you the willies, imagine what the thought of being married to St. Aldwyn does to me."

"They say reformed rakes make the best husbands."

"Debatable," Jo said, but the memory of his lips on hers still burned. Not even the talk of marriage quelled the sudden desire to feel his solid chest beneath her hands. Spying a huge cloaked figure in the distance, she said, "James approaches on your left."

Belle tipped her head slightly his way. "Don't know why he bothers with a cloak, a man that size will never be missed."

Jo smiled. James's presence did not draw attention, it commanded it. He acknowledged them with a nod and motioned to a narrow alley across the street, where they could converse out of sight.

"Ladies, thank you for meeting me on such short notice," he said with a smile that always appeared effortless.

"You have a project?" Jo asked.

He gave a single nod, his face grim. "Constance Cartwright."

Belle straightened at the name. "The duke of Richmond's niece who eloped with the son of a merchant?"

A soft rumbling noise tore from his throat signaling his displeasure.

Jo frowned in his direction. "That was not the case?"

"No," James snarled, "he kidnapped her and forced her into marriage, but for her family's sake she remained quiet about her husband's actions."

"But that's barbaric," Belle said horrified.

"And not even the worst part," James continued, his handsome face flushed with anger. "He refuses her any contact with her family and beats her when she attempts to run away. She remains under constant supervision, proving near impossible to get to her."

"Holy stars," Jo muttered. "Does your brother know about this?"

"No, I sent word but I'm afraid we have little time. We need to act fast and cannot afford any interference from your friends." He gave them both pointed looks. "We need to retrieve her quickly, effortlessly and undetected. Cartwright is a dangerous man and won't hesitate to kill any of us if we are caught."

"Why Lady Constance? He could have picked anyone, why did he pick her?" Belle asked.

"It appears to get back at the Duke. Cartwright holds a fierce bitterness after the Duke reportedly ruined his father's shipping business."

"Did he?" Jo asked.

James shrugged. "It matters not. We must save her before Cartwright's kills her, which is his ultimate plan."

"It will be difficult," Jo acknowledged. "But not impossible."

"We can burglarize his home and kidnap her?" asked Belle.

"Too dangerous," James said with a shake of his head. "A mouse cannot enter that residence without being caught or Richmond would have had his niece in his possession already."

"It may be possible to snatch her when she goes shopping," Jo murmured.

James scrunched his thick brows in thought. "That may work."

"How did you come by this information?" Belle asked with interest.

"I always have an ear pressed to the ground, Lady Belle. Nothing gets past me."

Jo did not doubt that. James may be charming with a smile never far from his lips (the exact opposite of his brooding brother), but he was still a formidable male and possessed the same darkness as Derek, a side Jo hoped to never be found on.

"Is Richmond aware of our impending rescue? It may prove to be disastrous should he interfere without our knowledge."

Belle nodded, looking expectantly at James.

"Yes," James confirmed, his eyes hooded. "I warned him."

"And he agreed?"

James hesitated. "He is afraid we may get his niece killed."

"But he agreed?" Jo pressed.

James shrugged. "He will not be a problem."

Jo shook her head in exasperation. "Very well, but if we survive this mission we may very well be axed by the Duke."

"Just be careful, no one can know we are sniffing around her skirts."

Belle pulled a face. "That's not an image I wished to imagine in my head, but we are not simpletons, Mr. Shaw."

But he had already started to retreat out of the alley.

"If you are not careful you may not have a head in a few weeks' time," he shot over his shoulder as he disappeared into the crowd, leaving Jo and Belle to stare at one another perplexed.

"Finally, some excitement."

In the days that followed, Jo had—to her complete satisfaction—avoided St. Aldwyn and replaced thoughts of the rogue with thoughts of rescuing Lady Constance. She had also steered clear of Craven, for it seemed every time she found herself ever in his near vicinity, St. Aldwyn appeared. Even so, it had become quite the chore to elude him around every turn. It appeared he wished to speak with her, though she had rather hoped after their last encounter, he would leave her be.

"Jo!" A chirpy voice called from behind her and Jo heaved a soft sigh. Damien had not been the only one she hoped to steer clear of.

"I have been searching for you everywhere," Evelyn said unhappily as she reached Jo's side. "Are you keeping me at arm's length?"

"Of course not," Jo lied, "but St. Aldwyn seems to be molded to your husband's side and I am very much trying to avoid him."

"Oh good, I thought perhaps you had another project which you did not want to include me in. So tell me about the wager," Evelyn said.

Jo's head spun as her friend hopped from one topic to another. "Perhaps, if you had not been seducing your husband at every event you may have gathered I have nothing to tell. Have you any shame?" Jo teased.

Evelyn cheeks turned a rosy hue. "We do seem to get carried away a lot."

"I'll say. You cannot keep your hands off each other. It's positively wicked."

"I never imagined marriage would be so... exciting," Evelyn

admitted with a small smile.

"You are lucky on that account," Jo agreed.

"Oh yes," Evelyn murmured, her gaze locating her husband in the crowd with a dreamy eyed expression. "If you will excuse me, I will be right back."

"Of course," Jo muttered. Clearly Evelyn and her husband were about to sneak away for a private moment. The couple was painfully obvious.

"Avoiding me will not make me go away," a voice drawled from behind her. Jo whirled around to find Damien staring down at her with a questioning brow. Double damn.

"My lord, to what do I owe this unpleasant surprise?"

"For one thing," he hesitated, perhaps to consider his words with care. "An apology."

"I have done nothing to apologize for."

"On the contrary, my dear, first you kiss—"

"I never kissed you!" she interrupted, and then quickly glanced around to make sure no one overheard her exclamation.

He ignored her. "Then you insult me."

Ah yes, she did do that.

"You may not have initiated the kiss," he said, leaning forward, his mouth almost pressing against her ear. "But you kissed me back, quite ardently, I might add."

"I did not!"

"Liar, but I still deserve an apology."

"Fine, I apologize."

His brow rose. "That was hardly a heartfelt apology. If you prefer, you may apologize with a kiss."

Jo stared up into the eyes of the devil. What nerve! "Have you ever meant an apology?" she asked with narrowed eyes.

"That's hardly the point."

"Will it make you leave?" she snapped.

"Yes."

"Very well," she clenched her teeth. Odious man. "My humble apologies for insulting your kiss. Are you satisfied now?"

"No, but I suppose it will have to do."

"I suppose it does, now please leave," Jo said, turning away.

"I'm not ready to leave quite yet."

Her head snapped back. "You said if I apologized you'd leave."

He lifted his shoulders. "I lied."

Jo opened her mouth to impart a scathing retort when she spotted Craven approaching through the crowd, causing her to smile instead. St. Aldwyn's gaze had turned suspicious at her sudden change of mood and Jo's smile deepened even more. She did not care if Craven's sole

purpose was to rile St. Aldwyn, in all likelihood to get back at him for their brawl in the gardens. It suited her all the same.

"Lady Josephine, you look lovely this evening," Craven spoke, prompting St. Aldwyn to stiffen, his face seemingly carved in stone.

Ah good, her smile widened and she turned to direct all her attention to Craven. At her offered hand he placed a soft kiss on the inside of her wrist, holding her palm slightly longer than deemed proper. The action caused St. Aldwyn to clench his fists and bunch his shoulders, as to void of a sudden attack.

"What do you want, Craven?" His sharp voice pierced the air.

Blue eyes locked with Jo's, unaffected by St. Aldwyn's rudeness. "I'm here to escort Lady Josephine to our dance."

Jo saw a spark of amusement before it was gone. Craven was indeed baiting the lion.

"That won't be necessary." St. Aldwyn's expression remained unchanged. "I will be dancing this set with *Josephine*."

"Oh stop it, both of you. I shall sit this dance out, thank you very much," she finished in a huff and stalked away from the men, annoyed to be in the center of their tug of war. Almost like a piece of scrap two dogs were fighting over. She had thought it would be entertaining to see St. Aldwyn's reaction to Craven, but both men proved to be equally bullheaded.

While Jo had put some distance between them, she still overheard Craven's amused voice when he said, "I see you're still your charming self."

"Go to hell." Came the reply, followed by the stomping footsteps of someone following her. St. Aldwyn seized her arm and proceeded to drag her to the far corner of the room.

"Let me go," she hissed, having seen her brother witness their exchange and begin to make his way through the crowd, his face like a thundercloud. She only possessed a few precious moments before her brutish brother reached them. "What has gotten into you?"

That seemed to bring him up short.

"I simply have to taste your sweetness again," he replied.

For pity's sake.

"Tell me you want me to kiss you again."

"I can't, my brother will be on us in a moment," she pleaded in a whisper.

"Tell me or I will kiss you now for your dear brother to see."

"You would not dare!" Jo gasped, her eyes wide.

"Tell me or you can explain to your brother why you allowed me to take such liberties."

Jo stared up at him, saw the truth in his eyes, the desire. Her breath caught. She wanted him to kiss her again. She wanted to be

pressed up against his hard chest, strong arms holding her captive.

"Yes, I do want to kiss you," she admitted on a sigh. A heated spark entered his eyes, but it disappeared with her next words, "But we can never do so again."

"And why is that?"

He seemed angry, but Jo could not dwell on the handsome man who stood before her. He'd flirted with many women in his life, shared their beds. Jo was not like those women. She would never be able to separate her heart from the deed and it became clear she'd be way out of her league where Damien was concerned.

"We just can't," she whispered, looking over to see (with relief) that her brother had been detained by one of the Middletons.

St. Aldwyn leaned close, his scent overpowering her senses, and lowered his voice. "You are scared."

Jo managed a snort.

"Perhaps not scared, but you, my lady, enjoy the element of danger. So why not live dangerously and kiss me again?"

Because my heart would never survive it.

She chose her words with care. "As I've said, it cannot happen again."

"Am I not dangerous enough for you then?"

"Too dangerous."

He flashed a wicked grin.

"My brother will be upon us soon, you need to go, please, my lord."

His mouth curled in displeasure. "You persist in calling me 'my lord' but still call Craven by his first name."

True, but then her heart was not in any danger from Craven. What Damien failed to understand was she had no interest in Craven. She never had. Yet for some reason his mind had latched onto the notion and would not let it go. To keep him at a distance, it seemed easier for him to believe she had set her cap on Craven. But it only fueled his determined to meddle in her affairs.

Another glance at her brother revealed he'd escaped Holly's clutches and was barreling her way.

"Craven and I have formed a friendship of sorts." And with that said, Jo turned and started to move away, leaving him to ponder *that* statement.

But his hand shot out to grasp her wrist. "You do understand that I fully intend to seduce you."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I'm bored and if I recall, you threw down the gauntlet when you implied that his kiss was much better than mine." When Jo only lifted a brow he continued in a more seductive tone,

“And deep down, you desire me.”

“Your confidence is misplaced, my lord,” Jo said, already stalking away.

He flashed another wicked grin, this time letting her go. “My confidence is never misplaced.”

Chapter 7

The following evening Josephine attended a ball held by Lord and Lady Weatherly, dressed in a simple gown of green silk, having decided it best not to aggravate her brother any further for the time being. It had taken hours of explanations and arguing for her brother to even allow her to set foot out of the house. Unsurprisingly, he did not approve of her recent choice of wardrobe and her consortment with certain gentlemen.

She slipped out onto the terrace with a breath of relief, sipping on a glance of wine she'd snatched from a footman's tray. At this very moment, her brother fended off the advances of Willow, while St. Aldwyn had yet to make an appearance. It presented the perfect opportunity to slip away to meet James, who wished to deliver urgent information on the plan to rescue Lady Constance.

Her lashes fluttered closed and Jo inhaled the crisp night air. How delightful and refreshing after hours of enduring a stuffy ballroom. Out here one could breathe and clear one's mind.

She feared the task that lay ahead may be much riskier than they first envisioned, after some research on Lady Constance's husband. The man was a tyrant, uncaring of the law. He sparked fear in to the hearts of everyone he came in to contact with and did not suffer disobedience. The task may even prove impossible to accomplish.

There existed no room for mistakes, which meant no room for kisses or any manner of seduction from a certain lord. However, she did not foresee St. Aldwyn being much of a problem. For one, his meddlesome interference did not include any hours during the day. Since their plan would most likely take part in the day, she would not need to avoid him so tirelessly.

"I must confess," a quiet voice pierced the darkness, "I do not much care for the way St. Aldwyn has been following my every step."

Eyes flying open, Jo whirled toward the dark voice.

Craven stood few feet away, leaning against the balustrade. His arms were thrown casually over one another and his long legs crossed at the ankles. He seemed the picture of perfect relaxation—except for his eyes. They appeared watchful and cold, instead of lazy and warm. His hair—a reddish brown mass of unruly waves—hung carelessly on his shoulders, much like St. Aldwyn's, although on St. Aldwyn the look appeared more savage than handsome. Ironic really, since Damien's eyes were never cold, but always warm. Even so, both men symbolized sin, temptation, and wickedness combined in one irresistible package. Funnily enough, unlike St. Aldwyn, Craven would never hold her interest. She may exhibit wicked thoughts in Craven's

presence but when she looked at Damien... she *felt* them.

Perhaps because she'd met St. Aldwyn first, perhaps even because of the warmth in his eyes. She did not know. It may even be because his presence had always been there, reminding her of his allure. Or perhaps the quandary lay not with the men, but her heart. *Gah, stop it, Jo!*

"Lady Jo?"

"Really, Lucien," Jo murmured on a breathless whisper, but not from desire. "Must you lurk about like that, frightening unsuspecting ladies?"

"My apologies," his lips twitched. "I did not mean to startle you."

"You didn't," she returned with a snort. "But you meant to do precisely that. Why else would you skulk in the shadows, not making a sound, allowing me to believe I was alone?"

"Why else indeed."

His voice, a soothing rumble, never failed to cause a shiver. He possessed one of those voices you could listen hours to, lulling you into a comfortable, relaxed state of mind. Goodness, wine did indeed loosen ones thoughts, Jo mused.

"You are not following me, are you?" she asked, her eyes narrowing on him, St. Aldwyn's proneness coming to mind.

"So suspicious for a lady," he murmured. "But I suppose with your beau nothing short of stalking your every step, you have every reason to be suspicious. Alas, I happened to be here when you came out."

"Yes well, perhaps I should return inside."

Aware James would show up at any moment, she turned to leave. It was bad enough Craven thought Damien stalked her, if he learned she met with another man alone on a terrace he may presume her to be some light skirt, prone to disappearing with men in dark places.

"Wait." He caught her arm in a gentle grip, his body so close his breath touched her skin. When had he moved so close?

"I am sorry, my lady. I did not mean to upset you."

Upset. He thought her upset? Inside the drawing room the music fell away and laughter floated out onto the terrace. If James did not make an appearance soon, another couple might.

"You did not upset me. I merely wished to be alone for a moment," Jo said, turning to go.

"Then perhaps," he persisted, drawing her near, "the drawing room is not the best place to be at the moment. Besides, St. Aldwyn may loiter inside and then you will have lost your chance at a small reprieve."

A bubble of laughter spilled from her lips. True, but if he or her brother caught them alone together, Jo would not be the one who

would be in need of a small reprieve. She spared a glance over her shoulder at the drawing room and took note of James, who had caught sight of her company. Oh bother!

She turned her green eyes back to Craven and saw that he'd noted her exchange.

She stepped away from him and he let her go, yet she did not retreat to the doors again. Instead, she took a step away from them, out of view from anyone else wondering by. Curious as to Craven's persistence, she stared at him with innocent expectance. "I take it you have something on your mind."

His eyes widened in appraisal. She had been right.

"You are perceptive, my lady."

"Or just smart," she pointed out, enjoying another sip of her wine.

His eyes thoughtful as he assessed her, they drifted over her face, and then lower, over her bodice before returning her stare. "My, my," he commented with a humorless voice. "No more flirtation, I suppose?"

"You suppose correct." Jo tilted her head and studied him over the rim of her glass. He did not seem to care if that was the case or not. She got the impression of him being more wary of allowing anyone inside his heart, than the cold heartless man he would have everyone believe. He hid behind his cold exterior, behind the mask of a rogue. She still harbored no delusions about him.

"There are rumors of your activities, but I never imagined them to be true until I saw him." His eyes flicked beyond her to the door and a sense of foreboding traveled down her spine. Those ice blue eyes settled on her again and any doubt Jo may have fostered evaporated.

"You are a handsome man, Lucien, no doubt used to women falling at your feet, but I will not be one of them, nor will I be threatened. What do you want?"

The lazy grin never wavered from his face as she spoke, but she caught a glimpse of respect flash in his eyes.

"Right to the point," he said in approval, "but no threat, Lady Jo. I wish to participate."

Jo blinked, certain she had not heard correctly. He wanted aid them? No, he wished to participate. A big difference.

"Where did you hear these rumors?" she asked, although Jo had her suspicions.

"You would be surprised by how much one learns, if one knows where to look and what to search for."

How very vague.

"And since it's clear you do not nurture any designs on me, there is no further need for games."

His voice held a sensual note. His words flowed over her like...

like...Jo shook it off. He may be in possession of a voice that reminded Jo of angels singing in harmony, but he was still dangerous.

"My intention has always been one kiss," she admitted. "Nor am I fool enough to believe that you suffer any designs on me. Now, let us get to the point. Why do you want to participate?"

He shrugged. "I'm bored."

Something in his voice gave her pause. Could there be more than he let on?

"How did you know what to search for?"

"Excuse me?"

"I merely batted my lashes. Why would you search for anything?"

His lips twitched. "I may have contemplated for a brief moment that you were playing St. Aldwyn against me," he answered. "The coincidence, you see, struck me as odd."

"What coincidence?" Jo demanded.

"You seemed to be within my reach every time St. Aldwyn arrived," he said noncommittally. "Then I remembered your quip about kidnapping me if I learned your secrets, which gave me pause. I still wasn't sure, until I saw your exchange with James Shaw moments ago. Quite the men you are acquainted with, heh."

Jo stared at him dumbfounded.

He continued, "St. Aldwyn may now be hounding your every step because of me, but he started because of Shaw. Now Shaw, he has called on Richmond, which can only be because of his niece. Cartwright is a dangerous man, my lady."

Astonishment lit her eyes. The way he'd figured out their plan was nothing short of alarming. Was there a sign stamped on her back that read "*I'm planning to kidnap Lady Constance?*" James had to be informed post-haste of this new development.

"I'm sorry, I need to go."

Jo spun around to leave, panicked, but Craven caught her arm. This time, his grip unrelenting, he jerked her to him. His icy blue eyes bore down on her, narrow and suspicious. For an instant they just stood there, staring at each other when suddenly, Craven cursed softly. Then his lips came crashing down upon hers in a brutal force.

It was a kiss meant to teach her a lesson. Jo had to admit that perhaps she needed to be taught a lesson. How else was she to learn to heed caution when someone warned her of danger? On the other hand, the last time Craven had kissed her they were rudely interrupted, so it offered the perfect opportunity to see if he measured up to Damien. Jo supposed she should have realized her current reflections meant all rational thought had left her mind and that she indeed, played a dangerous game. But instead of pushing him away, she rose onto her tiptoes.

So far as kisses fared, it seemed pleasant enough—as to be expected—but not nearly as earth shattering as Damien’s had been. Deliberately, her palms slid up the front of his coat, and then her fingers curled into the softness of his hair, just as she had done with St. Aldwyn.

His lips molded over hers again and again, seductive and sinful. And when his tongue teased lightly across her lips, Jo melted against him, and opened, inviting his tongue to slide silkily along hers. In the back of her mind warning bells sounded. The music, the loud chatter, everything seemed to disappear in the background, everything except...*Damien*. Damn, Craven’s kiss did not come close to igniting a raging fire within her. For a long, disappointing moment, he deepened the kiss, pulling her up against him as his tongue plundered her mouth, to no avail.

She was about to push him away when his lips were torn away from hers, and left Jo swaying in his embrace, blinking her eyes as if dazed. Not because of the kiss, but at the utter realization that she felt nothing. Bad news indeed, because it meant that if Craven, with his angelic beauty and sinful mouth could not ignite passion from her, no other man would. That blasted rake called St. Aldwyn had ruined her. A shocking revelation, one she had no interest in pursuing. At the moment.

Craven cursed again, this time more vehemently. “This has to stop.”

“What?” Jo asked, disoriented from the wine or the unwelcome revelation.

He gave a soft, rueful smile. “My dear, you are on the verge of ruination and I am on the verge of losing what little control I have left. I am not a man to deny myself the simple pleasures, so this has to stop.”

Jo nodded, her cheeks flaming and guilt unfurling. She possessed the power to make him lose control while she portrayed but mild interest, and not in the way he preferred.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her into the view of the drawing room, muttering, “No harm has been done.”

But that was not true, Jo acknowledged. Lucien may only have kissed her again, but inside she still trembled. His kiss had made something perfectly clear—she needed to find a way to stay away from Damien.

Jo took a step away from Craven, closer to the exit.

“Do you not think it best to tell me what you are attempting to do?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“With St. Aldwyn,” he clarified, his arms crossing his chest.

“What is going on between the two of you? You wish to make him jealous? I thought you above such petty ministrations.”

Jo tried to keep her expression blank but couldn't quite keep the scowl from her face. “There is nothing between us.”

“He does not act like a man with nothing between you.”

“Yes, well, unfortunately it dates back to before I even met you. His hackles have been raised ever since.”

He laughed softly. “So he took it upon himself to save you from your little projects, has he?”

Jo stared at him in shock. “How did you know?”

He lifted his shoulders. “I make it a habit of knowing everything about a woman who wishes to gain my attention.”

There lay a wealth of meaning behind his words—regardless, his skills of observation bordered on genius. They may have use for him yet, for the most part since James's brother would not be back in time to aid them. “I will take your offer under consideration.”

“That is all I ask.”

Jo nodded and turned to go, but jumped when the doors were thrown open with sudden force by none other than her brother. Well, at least some things never change, Jo reflected while she watched her brother heave under his anger. Willow stood a short distance behind her brother, mouthing an apology. Damn.

Her brother pierced Craven with a murderous glare before his heated eyes flicked to her.

“What are you doing out here with this mongrel?” Brahm hissed in a low voice, mindful not to draw attention to them.

Craven answered before Jo had a chance to explain. “Your sister wished for a breath of fresh air and did not notice me on the balcony.”

Her brother ignored him. “Why did you not return inside when you realized you weren't alone?”

“Stop being such a stubble head, Brahm. I desired a touch of fresh air. If you failed to notice it is quite hot and stifling inside. Nothing untoward happened and I remained in view of everyone.”

Her brother's eyes narrowed, yet he remained silent as he regarded them with a steely glare. Craven, the rogue, had lifted a brow at her *nothing untoward happened* line. What had he expected, a confession?

“What a cozy little scene.” The deep, masculine voice of St. Aldwyn penetrated the silence and Jo stiffened as he came into view, stopping by her brother's side.

His gaze hardened when he caught sight of Craven, but he said nothing. However, his displeasure could not be missed. By Jiminy! What happened to the charm from charming rakes? If only these men knew how united they were in the same cause—keeping her from

trouble.

Her cheeks flushed in warmth and she fanned her face with her hand. The balcony, now crowded, left Jo to spare a longing glance to the interior beyond her brother. Her escape blocked by the two figures standing before her, she considered dashing off into the gardens.

"Have you also come for some fresh air, my lord?" Jo asked, albeit a bit snappy.

As if sensing her discomfort, Craven stepped forward, bringing him to her side. "St. Aldwyn, always a pleasure."

"Too hot," Jo muttered, not at all sounding like herself, suddenly dizzy and somewhat disorientated. She glanced down at the empty glass in her hands, her third one this night. A loud hiccup blurted from her lips, surprised at the own sound emitting from her throat.

"Oh! Beg pardon," she said, her face flushed with embarrassment.

Three pairs of eyes fell on her crimson face.

Another hiccup.

"Oh!"

Her brother's eyes dropped to the glass dangling between her fingers and narrowed. "How much have you had to drink?"

"Too much I would imagine," she replied tartly. How unfortunate she hadn't put a name to the effects of the wine. Until now. Still, she did not feel anywhere near intoxicated—only a bit fuzzy.

"If you wish, I will escort you home, Lady Josephine," Craven said with a suggestive note, winking at her.

If he wanted to rile the two men it worked, for her brother exploded, "Like hell!" while Damien took a menacing step forward.

Jo giggled.

How embarrassing to be dragged away like some errant child by her brother, but Jo did not much care at the moment. Her mind was occupied by other matters, like Damien and the heated promise she'd seen in his eyes, just before her brother hauled her away.

Damien waited until Warton hauled Josephine out of sight before he folded his arms over his chest, his jacket straining over his muscled form. For whatever reason, Craven had just made Damien stink of roses in comparison to him. Warton now had someone else to dislike more than himself.

"What did you do outside with Josephine? And spare me the rot about fresh air," Damien snapped, all pretense of civilization gone.

"No rot, only truth. I was already here when the little lady came out," Craven drawled after several heart beats of silence. "And I do not practice the art of gossip."

Damien had to force himself to stay calm. "Is that so?"

"Look, St. Aldwyn, before you threaten me, it would be best to

consider why Lady Josephine chose me over you.”

The fact that Craven’s voice held no trace of triumph gave Damien pause. Even so, the subtle shift in Craven’s body alerted him to the fact the man prepared himself for another brawl.

Craven might be a bastard, but he appeared to be a smart one. He clearly sensed any further provocation on his part may end in fisticuffs. How unfortunate that Lady Josephine lacked common sense, but how fortunate for him. He had warned her but she’d refused to listen. Far from an empty threat, he would enjoy her punishment. Indeed, it offered him the perfect excuse to teach her some lessons in seduction.

With the roll of his shoulders he relaxed his muscles but still eyed Craven with a sneer. “I will say this only once more, stay away from her or next time you awake from a peaceful slumber, you will find yourself in a padlock.”

By the look of surprise on Craven’s face, he had heard the truth of Damien’s threat. His spirits somewhat restored, Damien turned on his heel and stalked in the direction of the doors, not bothering to greet his hosts. He wanted to drink himself to oblivion. If he was lucky, he would pass out and forget about the bewitching Josephine with her sweet cherry lips and captivating green eyes.

Chapter 8

Jo wandered through the halls of her home in search of her errant maid Sarah, who was supposed to inform her as soon as her brother departed for his club. She expected James and Belle to call on her within the hour and they relied on the utmost discretion for their meeting.

Secrecy and discretion aside, Jo's mind refused to rid her of little nuisances like a certain marquis and his delectable kiss, which was a cause for concern. For if her mind remained fixed on kisses and heated stares instead of on Lady Constance, a blunder would be imminent.

All of a sudden Sarah barreled down the hallway, her face awash with relief when she spotted Jo. "My lady, I've been searching for you everywhere," she rushed to say, out of breath.

"Well, here I am. Where is my brother? I do not know whether he's left or hides in one of the closets."

"Oh yes, my lady, he left moments before the marquis arrived."
Jo stilled. "The marquis?"

Her head bobbed up and down. "He is quite insistent for an audience, my lady."

"Am I not to have some peace?" Jo complained and turned on her heel and instructed over her shoulder, "Please send a note to Lady Belle that I will receive her in a quarter of an hour. I should be rid of the devil by then."

Her pace brisk as she made her way to the drawing room, she cursed her luck, yet was secretly pleased. Had he come to badger her for being caught alone with Craven? Perhaps she may even receive a kiss. Her cheeks flushed at the notion and she entered the drawing room rather breathless.

"My lord," she murmured when she spied him gazing out of the windows, his back to her.

At the sound of her voice, he turned around and Jo suppressed a simpering sigh at the sight of him. His hair seemed to have lost a battle with wind, tangled in a thick mass that never seemed to find any order on his head. A day's growth of beard coated the lower half of his face, lending him the appearance of a polished pirate. Eyes filled with promise bored in to hers as he shortened the distance between them.

"My lady," he murmured, capturing her hand in his. "You look ravishing as always."

Her heart skipped a beat at the sensation of his skin touching hers. Of their own accord her lashes lowered to gaze at where his hand held hers. Her hand was pale and small against the tanned

strength of his; his touch, while strong, was gentle. Jo watched, transfixed, as he lifted her hand to his mouth. With his gaze locked on hers, he pressed a warm kiss to the palm of her hand. Though not the first time he had kissed her hand, it seemed more intimate, more meaningful.

Be still my traitorous heart.

The pressure of his mouth touching her skin sent a shiver up her whole body and before she recovered her breath, he lowered her hand and released it. Jo pressed her lips together to contain her disappointment and hoped she appeared disapproving instead of doe eyed.

“My lord, this is an unexpected surprise.” Not as unexpected as her sudden affections, she thought dryly. She would have to find a way to balance the scale, since it had tipped right into his rakish charm. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“I wish to call a truce.”

Taken aback, she blinked. “A truce implies a war of some kind and we are hardly enemies.”

“Yet, I would not call us friends,” he murmured with half a smile.

Right. Jo wanted to summon up annoyance, which was far more preferable to this heated, almost painful awareness of him. But his strength, his confidence, it appealed to her in every damnable way. A truce was out of the question.

“It seems to be the way of things, for our encounters to end in an awkward manner.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “Do I make you uncomfortable?”

He hadn’t moved, yet somehow he appeared closer, and Jo resisted the urge to take an involuntary step backward. “Yes.”

“I see.”

“Then you would understand if I did not agree to accept your boon. I would prefer you kept your distance.”

He stared down at her, his eyes filled with something she couldn’t read, and a hint of unmistakable amusement. “I can’t do that.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both.”

“You should leave,” Jo said after a moment.

“I will leave, Josephine, but I warned you would not like what happened if I found you alone with Craven again.”

“*You* did not find me alone with him.”

“True, but that does not change the fact that you were alone with him. I will say this only once more—stay away from Craven. Next time I hear a whisper of the two of you together, I will throw you over my knee and give you the spanking you deserve. Did you kiss him again?”

His low whisper set her cheeks aflame, but she remained silent.

His eyes hardened.

Jo folder her arms over her chest and his eyes lowered to her bosom. How vexing this transformation was: from the seductive gentleman to the dominating male in a heartbeat.

“No, I did not kiss him, he kissed me.”

Jo watched a flurry of emotions passed his face. Anger, jealousy, desire, murder, all raged together forming such a rousing result she wished she had lied.

“Do not be mad; it will never be repeated again. He thought only to teach me a lesson. He thought I meant to make you jealous.”

His eyes narrowed upon hearing that. “Did you mean to?”

“Of course not. But what else was he supposed to think with you appearing around every nook and crook?”

Some of his anger faded away, but not all. She noted this with relief, though she remained displeased. Still, she did not pull away when his arm lifted to trace a finger across the line of her jaw.

Her footman chose that moment to arrive, followed by Belle.

Drat.

Her friend’s eyes widened in mock surprise when she spotted Jo’s guest. “Oh my, I did not realize you had a caller, Jo.”

“Oh, it’s quite all right. The marquis was just about to leave.”

His smile did not quite reach his eyes when he replied, “Yes, I still have some business I need to see to.”

“Let us hope your business does not give you a black eye.”

His lips quirked. “Doubtful.”

“Oh I don’t know, my lord, visiting a dragon in its lair is far different from kicking a dog when it’s down.”

Jo straightened when he took a menacing step forward, but Belle’s dry voice halted his advance.

“Should I perhaps come back another time? I seem to have interrupted a personal matter.”

Jo shot her a glare. “Do not dare leave. Damien is guided by a misplaced sense of duty to protect me. Apparently my brother is not a good enough a guardian.”

St. Aldwyn straightened his coat. “If your brother did a good enough job at keeping an eye on his charge, I would not have to.”

“I daresay my brother would argue with that.”

“Well by all means, where is the old fellow?”

“Listen, you oversized bull, perhaps you would care to tell me why an notorious rogue like yourself, and a somewhat amateurish one, like Westfield, feels the need to follow two ladies around like we are about to set fire to London?”

They stood so close her legs almost buckled under the heat

radiating from his body. He was angry, too. His eyes were hard, while his face could have been carved in stone.

Belle, who stared with acute interest at the two of them, moved to take a seat on the settee.

“Now that, Jo,” her friend said as she gazed at Damien as if he was a reptile to be stomped on, “is a good question.”

Astutely, he must have sensed he had stepped into murky waters because he took a step back, although the hardness never left his eyes as they bore into her. “This isn’t over, Josephine.”

“I beg to differ, my lord.”

Jo watched Damien take his leave with a distant sense of detachment. After they rescued Lady Constance, she planned to depart for the country for a much needed reprieve from temptation.

“Well that was...interesting,” Belle murmured.

“Interesting would not be the word I’d use to describe this mess.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t,” Belle said, her smile knowing. “You and St. Aldwyn appeared pretty intimate.”

“We kissed,” Jo admitted on a sigh, and when Belle only lifted a brow she continued, “After he caught me kissing Craven in the gardens.” Jo left out the part where he vowed he would seduce her.

Her friend’s eyes lit with intrigue. “You won the wager and kissed St. Aldwyn?”

“You don’t need to sound so pleased,” Jo muttered.

“Of course I am pleased! You are far too solemn with all your projects.”

Jo shrugged. She preferred her projects over petty flirtations. Her eyes flicked beyond Belle where James’s broad shoulders filled the doorway. With a gasp Jo hurried forward, motioning him to enter and shut the door.

“Are you mad? You are not supposed to be seen,” Jo admonished.

James returned her rebuke with one of his charming smiles. “I became tired of lurking behind the tree in your back yard. If I’m not mistaken, that’s your method.”

“One of the servants may have spotted you.”

“Oh hush, Jo,” Belle joined in, “I’m sure we can provide a distraction for him to slip out unnoticed.”

“Let us hope so. I doubt a distraction big enough exists to hide a mountain. If my brother returns, he will notice a huge hulking form tip-toeing around the halls.”

James nudged Jo playfully. “I’ll put on my best charm if we are caught.”

Jo shook her head and turned to Belle. “Have you managed to retrieve Lady Constance’s schedule?”

Belle nodded. “Not an easy task, but I managed to learn some of

her activities. She rarely ever leaves the house without her husband and when she does, she is always accompanied by two lackeys, but it is also rumored two more men always follow in the crowd, unseen.”

“Damnation. So it’s true,” James muttered.

“There is, however, one moment when she is alone...at the dressmaker’s shop. They don’t accompany her inside, but wait outside and watch the entrance.”

James’s eyes held wonder as he gazed at Belle. “How did you manage to retrieve all that information?”

“I have my resources.” Belle lips twitched in an impish manner.

“Then perhaps,” Jo murmured distractedly, “we should snatch her in the dressmakers shop.”

“That can work, but the men will see you enter. We cannot take that chance,” James said with a shake of his head.

“They won’t see us because we will already be in the shop, posing as shop girls.” Belle’s eyes twinkled as she caught on to Jo’s plan.

Jo nodded, her eyes alight with excitement. “Yes, we can wear wigs to cover our hair. Our only concern will be to sneak her out of the shop without being detected.”

“What about a commotion on the street?” Belle asked.

James shifted on his feet. “With all due respect, Lady Belle, your distractions never work.”

Belle gasped in mock outrage. “How rude of you to point it out, but I believe you have mistaken me for someone else. I am an expert at orchestrating commotions.”

“She’s right, James. Moreover she never fails, being remarkably good in everything she does,” Jo admitted.

“Very well, what did you have in mind?”

“I propose my cousins assist with distraction,” she held up her hand when he would have protested, “they do not need to know the why of it and they will be in disguise, but without them we cannot hold the attention of four men, however big.”

“I don’t like it,” James muttered.

“Do not look so worried, Mr. Shaw. I assure you my cousins will prove invaluable.”

“That remains to be seen, however, once the men are distracted, we must be quick. Their attention will not be diverted for long.”

“Agreed,” Belle said. Jo noticed her words were mocking. No doubt her friend had every intention of causing a commotion so big it would capture the attention of everyone and hold them spellbound.

“What will you tell your cousins?” Jo asked, curious.

“Oh, not much, just that you are up to your usual tricks and trouble.”

A snort from Jo and a grunt from James was the only answer.

“As this will transpire in daylight, I doubt your beaux will be cause for concern, but I will sleep more peacefully if I know for certain they will not get in our way,” James muttered.

“Regardless of their continued meddling ways, they do not wander to tea parties in broad daylight. It ruins their rakish reputations.”

Belle’s laughter filled the air. “I can just see the match-making mommas rubbing their hands together in glee.”

James seemed less impressed. “If I have learned anything in life, it is not to underestimate anyone. Perhaps a peaceful slumber till noon will do the trick.”

“How will you arrange that?” Jo said, clasping her hands together.

James’s smile turned wicked and his eyes cunning. “I have my ways.”

“If you insist, but I don’t foresee any trouble from anyone other than Cartwright. He should be our main concern. While we will all be in disguise, the shopkeeper and her assistant will not. They will be the first ones Cartwright will approach.”

James waved her concern aside. “Cartwright is too arrogant to believe mere peasants would conspire against him. He may question them, but nothing more.”

“We can pay the shopkeeper to stay away for the day. But Cartwright’s investigation will be thorough,” Belle cautioned.

“All the more reason for us to be cautious,” Jo acknowledged.

James frowned, shifting on his long legs. “Perhaps this project is too dangerous, too reckless for young ladies to be part of.”

Jo shook her head. She understood his concern, for he felt responsible for their safety, even more so because of his brother’s absence, but they would be fine. Perhaps...her gaze captured his, a plan forming in her mind. “We will not be reckless with our lives, James. You can rest assured of that.”

He seemed unconvinced. “The commotion, it must not attract attention to your cousins or any of us. It may mean their deaths—or worse, torture.”

Belle scoffed. “Do not be so theatrical, Mr. Shaw. I for one do not wish to die.” Jo only lifted her shoulders in answer when James shot an exasperated look her way.

Belle sighed in dramatic fashion. “The commotion will be nothing but a series of unfortunate events leading to a grand disturbance. We will not be tied to it.”

“Fine, just don’t enjoy it too much,” James muttered.

“May I propose another addition to our group?” Jo asked, her gaze never leaving James. At his raised brow she continued, “Craven.”

That earned her a suspicious look from Belle.

"Have you gone mad?" James exploded, incredulous.

Jo shrugged. "He approached me and besides, we could do well with another male present, should something go wrong."

"He approached you?" James asked, taken aback.

"Yes," she shot back. "He claimed to have heard rumors of our activities and I believe he is bored."

"And you are only telling us this now?" Belle asked.

"Well," Jo murmured with a trace of sarcasm for her friend. "I would have told you sooner but I forgot."

Belle blinked. "You forgot that a man such as Craven wishes to take part in our project?"

Jo pulled a face. "I still cannot fathom where he heard such rumors."

Belle's face blotted beetroot red. Still she managed to ask, "And what, pray tell, is he going to do?"

"Do not fret, Lady Belle," James cut in, "he'll be aiding me."

Jo beamed. "Oh good. I will inform him of our decision."

"This is a bad idea, Jo," Belle advised.

"Rubbish," Jo said, mimicking Belle's pose by placing her hands on her hips. James's eyes flared with curiosity.

"You have history."

"Now, wait just a minute." James said. "What's this about history?"

Jo ignored him. "Two kisses can hardly be called history. It did not mean a thing."

"You kissed Craven?"

"You kissed him twice?"

Jo sighed. "Yes, we kissed more than once."

"The wager was one kiss."

"The second kiss was an unexpected singular instance," she told Belle.

"Bloody hell," James muttered. "Save me from women and their feeble games."

That earned him two frosty glares.

"My brother is going to kill me," he muttered.

"Of course he is, that has never been in doubt," Jo said.

Derek Shaw was a force to be reckoned with and would be livid. The brothers were as different as day and night. Derek's word ruled and he controlled with an iron fist. Overly protective when it came to his brother and his loved ones, Jo knew when he learned of their actions, the earth would crumble beneath his wrath.

"None of us will be safe from his fury. Perhaps we should scatter once he arrives back in London?"

James laughed. "Ah sweetheart, there is no place we can hide where he won't find us."

Belle scoffed. "You make it sound as if he is some sort of god or deity. Surely it will not be that bad. We are, after all, saving a woman's life."

Jo shook her head at Belle. Her friend had yet to meet Derek Shaw, so she could not possibly understand. "Do not believe for a moment he is like our James here."

"One may even say he is the darker version of me," James supplied. "I'm still certain he sprouts horns when no one is looking."

"Well then, I can't wait to meet this paragon I've heard so much about, but I still believe Craven's motives to be questionable."

Chapter 9

The soft crackle of a fire was the only sound in the dark room where Damien sat in brooding silence, the bitter taste of brandy a welcome burn on his tongue. He watched as sharp orange flames leaped and twirled in a fiery dance, reminding him of a certain beguiling temptress. He imagined her swaying with their rhythm, her gown a pool of flames wafting gently through the air.

Every time Damien recalled Josephine's impish smile he could not help but be convinced she was about to stir up trouble. Not the kind of trouble ladies usually got into like, forgetting their parasol or stomping on someone's foot or even stealing a kiss from an admirer. No, the kind of trouble that would to cause all kinds of trouble—for him.

I have no use for a husband.

It seemed like a lifetime ago when she spoke those words, but they danced around in his head, brewing in his mind. Unlike the other ladies, who wish to find the perfect match, Lady Josephine did not desire one. But then, she hardly acted like other ladies, wearing scandalous gowns and dashing off into the streets of London, kidnapping her peers.

To Damien, she out shone every woman he'd ever met by a spectacular degree of beauty and wit. Hence, his brooding mood. That he remained drawn to the woman in such a fierce way alarmed him. Sure, he loved bedding women – *different* women – sometimes he even loved bedding down with two at the same time, but never had his interest lasted more than one night.

He'd done things even Westfield, his best friend, would shudder at. Josephine had been correct when she'd labeled Westfield an amateurish rake. His friend may like to believe himself somewhat of a rakish fiend, but he'd always been a gentleman. It was why Damien never told him of his more deprived pursuits.

He ran his hand through his disheveled hair. He needed to get Josephine out of his blood.

Would seducing her be enough? He recalled their first exchange, that moment so tremendous, so clear, it felt as if someone had taken a hammer to his chest, knocking out every single breath inside of him. He'd known without a shadow of a doubt that his life had changed forever. But true to himself, he fought against it with all his might.

He recalled his father once saying: *You will never see the moment coming that will knock you on your backside boy, let's just hope it doesn't rip away your soul as it did mine.*

His father had been right.

Well, half right. Damien had gotten knocked on his backside and he hadn't seen the moment coming, but his soul remained intact. So what that he seemed to be a bit infatuated, it was nothing a good tumble in his bed wouldn't cure. No, her bed. While he may love women—love seducing them and playing their silly games—their bed always ensured him a quick departure. And as a rule he avoided bedding virgins. An involuntary shudder racked his body. The mere thought gave him the willies. Yet, his Josephine would never become so possessive and proprietorial or burst into tears when she learned his interests were less than honorable.

He took another sip of his brandy, closing his eyes at the burning sensation traveling down his throat. He should walk away, but it proved a feat even more impossible than marriage.

And try as he might, he could not figure out whether she planned on seducing Craven or not, but if she wished to be relieved of her virginity, who was he to argue? He was not without honor—he just chose to ignore it. She did not wish to marry, and he did not wish to ask. It made for the perfect arrangement, even though he pretty much expected his seduction of a virgin to finally blacken his soul.

He'd half expected Westfield to confront him, not that his friend knew of his plans. Although if Westfield cared to look, which he would have if he'd not also been so preoccupied with Lady Belle, his perceptive eyes may have taken note of Damien's intent. Just as well, no need for Westfield to see how ashen his heart had become.

Bloody hell, he would drive himself off his head with all these thoughts. No use for this pointless internal debate, for planning to seduce Lady Josephine. He would enjoy doing it. And he planned to do it more than once. He slouched into his chair and downed the rest of his brandy, staring into the crackling embers.

A knock at the door sounded and Hendrickson appeared. "The Earl of Westfield, my lord," he announced moments before Westfield entered.

Damien at once noticed the strain around his old friend's eyes. "Rough night?" Damien asked, rising to fill his glass with another brandy.

Westfield produced a tired smile when Damien handed him a glass as well. "Damn woman," he said, taking a gulp of the golden liquid.

"I take it you are referring to the lovely Lady Belle."

Westfield snorted into his glass before plopping down in a chair. "Lovely is not my preferred word of choice. Do you suspect they are up to their old tricks again?"

Damien considered that. He knew Westfield was referring to Josephine's projects. It may be the case, but he hadn't noticed any odd

behavior that suggested secret activities. Well, except her sudden interest in seducing Craven. The thought made him scowl. Still, if they'd been plotting another project, they'd done so without causing suspicion.

"No," he murmured. "Even Shaw retains his distance."

"And that's not suspicious?" Westfield asked, crossing his leg over the other.

"Shaw may be a bastard, but he isn't stupid. I doubt he'd do anything while his brother is out of town."

"That does not reassure me in the least."

Damien sipped on his brandy in reflective consideration. "Look at us, all obsessed and tormented."

Westfield's hooded eyes flicked to Damien, a thin smile playing across his lips. "Remarkable, I know."

Damien nodded. Lady Josephine had tricked her brother somehow and had him wrapped around her finger, so someone needed to keep her in line. And he desired to do it. The mere thought aroused him.

"So what has Lady Belle done to put you in such a wary mood?" Damien drawled, hoping the change of topic would get his mind out of the gutter.

"She has put the hounds on my heel."

"Hounds?" Brandy sputtered from his mouth.

"Her cousins."

Most of the time Damien excelled at keeping a straight face, but the image Westfield painted was too much. He burst out laughing.

"Not funny, my friend," Westfield said. "Apparently her cousins are husband hunting and I am on their list of eligible bachelors. I've been hiding in coat closets ever since."

Damien inhaled a deep breath, trying to control his laughter. "Now there's a terrifying prospect."

"I assure you, it is not the slightest bit of funny. I am living in constant fear of being entrapped."

Damien could not help himself though, the effects of the brandy had begun to take effect and his friend's put out expression was quite comical.

"Every time I see a Middleton, I must force myself not to bolt in another direction. I'm plagued by nightmares of them, for Christ's sake," Westfield muttered and drained his brandy.

"Surely it's not that bad?"

"I assure you," Westfield said on a sigh, idly trailing the pads of his fingertips along the rim of the brandy glass. "It cannot get any worse. There must be something I can do to get them off my back."

Damien considered Westfield's predicament, an idea forming in

his mind. The Middletons were the embodiment of a man's nightmare—beautiful and witty, yes, but too smart and too outspoken. Like little dogs nipping at one's heels. Of course Westfield would balk at their interest. As would any man who had no desire for their ears to be talked off. And if the Middletons persisted, it would not be long before the tongues started to wag. His friend required but a short reprieve, in which he might escape their clutches.

"I may have an idea to get them off of your back."

Westfield's hopeful expression caused Damien to chuckle. "It's quite simple, all we need to do is spread a rumor that each Middleton sister is in possession of a considerable amount of dowry. Every fortune hunter in England will be on their trail."

Westfield frowned. "That's a bit extreme, no?"

"You disagree?" Damien inquired.

"Of course not," Westfield muttered. "I'm just wrapping my mind around your evil one."

"It's a brilliant plan," Damien pointed out.

"It's the best plan I've heard in ages," Westfield agreed with a nod.

Damien managed a smirk. "They will be so busy avoiding the advances of all the riffraff, they won't have time to pester you."

"Christ man," Westfield said alarmed, "where do you get all your nefarious plans?"

Damien chuckled, not the least bit offended. "I'm a beast, of course."

But the truth was he hated doe eyed, moonlit pleasantries. All the time he owned for romance came in the form of charm and wicked smiles. He also cared little for anything except his close friends, which extended only to Westfield and Grey. Other than that, the world could go to Hades.

As a lord he had a duty to wed and produce heirs, but to hell with duty. His father had been a snake and perhaps Damien even inherited his father's foul moods. But the blame lay solely on his predecessor for not producing a spare to the heir before he killed Damien's mother. Well, not killed in the actual sense of murder, but he drove her to kill herself, which in Damien's estimation, was as good as committing the deed.

Perhaps if his mother had not killed herself in front of him and his father, he would have grown up ignorant of his father's flaws. He'd been a mess after that, and that was how Westfield had found him, a crying heap of mess. The memory of that day never lingered far, like a black stain on his soul. Although his friend never once in all their long years of friendship spoke of it or even alluded to it.

"Have you learned anything else about the elusive Shaw

brothers?" Damien asked abruptly, hoping to distract himself from the path his thoughts had taken.

"No," Westfield said darkly. "They are remarkably good at hiding their dealings. People only ever recall spying a mountain of a man each time before a disappearance, but while that fits the description of James Shaw, or even his brother, it can never be proved."

Damien stood, eager for another brandy. What a splendid night to drown himself in his fine bottles of gold.

"Of course, those bastards are too smart to leave clues for the amateur sleuth."

"I hope you are not referring to me," Westfield said, his disgruntled tone causing Damien to chuckle.

"I would never, yet they are smart."

Westfield shot him a sharp glance.

"Don't look at me like that, old friend. You have to admire their genius."

"I don't have to admire anything pertaining to those brutes."

Damien was again reminded of his mother, standing before them, eyes filled with tears, a pistol aiming at her heart. He'd tried to placate his mother, but his father's cruel laughter had been the final nail in his mother's coffin and the reason she pulled the trigger, plastering her blood all over his father's study—this very study. Damien would recognize a brute. His father had been a true one, not the Shaws, but Damien wasn't about to point that out to his friend. He pushed the reminders aside, though he could never push them out entirely, and wondered why tonight of all nights they hovered on the surface.

"There are worse things roaming about than those two."

"I suppose."

"Like the Middletons and their marriage-minded intentions," Damien said to lighten the suddenly glum air.

"By spreading lies."

"Not lies," Damien said waving a hand in the air. "Their dowry isn't known to anyone, perhaps there is a reason for that."

"Oh?" Westfield asked, his eyes lighting with speculation. "Perhaps they have none."

Damien only lifted his shoulder in response.

"You are the devil, you know that?"

"Of course, I was commissioned by London's finest."

His friend drew back at the sarcasm in his tone. "I'm sorry, I did not mean to imply—"

"Of course you didn't," Damien interrupted. "It is what it is."

"So," Westfield said, directing the conversation to a more appropriate topic, "I heard you paid Craven a visit. Care to elaborate

on that?"

"Paying attention to rumors now, are you?"

"Of course."

"What else have you learned?"

"Not much, but I assume that Lady Josephine is somehow involved."

"The chit has decided she wishes to seduce Craven."

Westfield's mouth dropped open. "What?"

Damien's dark scowl turned even darker. "Yes, it would seem it started as a wager to gain a kiss, which escalated to something else entirely."

"Is my sister involved?"

Damien nodded. "Yes, and your Lady Belle even had her little hounds on my heel for a while, to distract me, but I'm not one to be led around the nose."

Westfield scowled. "She's not my Lady Belle and why would Lady Josephine choose Craven as a conquest? The man's reputation is even darker than yours."

"Pure speculation."

"I take it Lady Josephine won the wager."

Damien nodded, downing his brandy.

"I take it you did not respond well?"

"Westfield," Damien warned, his voice tight and its the meaning clear. *Stop.*

"You know, Lady Josephine would make for an interesting wife."

"No, she would not."

Yes, she would.

"Well, how would you know? You seem to like her well enough."

"I'm not marrying Lady Josephine!" Damien snapped, annoyed now. Saints, married. Him? Did Westfield wish to torture him?

"It was only a suggestion."

"Well you can stop with your unwanted suggestions."

"Why do you always have to ruin my pleasure?"

"Because your pleasure falls into the same category as torture and my enjoyment tonight consists of getting foxed and spreading rumors of poor unsuspecting females."

"Now there's a plan."

Westfield's brilliant smile made him appear young and boyish. Damien had always envied his friend that trait. He was an easy fellow, with no foul moods or tempers, the exact opposite of Damien.

He just hoped Westfield, protector of all females, would still be so charming after he learned that Damien seduced Lady Josephine. He had subjected himself long enough to this agony. And it was agony, lusting after her, watching her bat her lashes at Craven.

"By the by, what did Craven say when you confronted him?" Westfield asked.

"Nothing," Damien said. "The bastard said nothing."

"Well, perhaps we will run into him tonight and beat him to a pulp."

"Now there's a satisfying thought," Damien muttered darkly.

Or better yet, find himself a willing woman with ample charms to bury himself in, to make him forget all about innocent young ladies. It appeared Westfield had the same idea.

"Yes, then we can find ourselves some lovely womanly charms," his friend's voice slurred.

How many brandies have they had?

"I was just thinking the same thing," Damien said, noticing his voice too, had a slight slur to it.

"We have yet to experience our golden years. Years before we need to consider marriage."

That caught Damien's attention. "You say that as if the thought has crossed your mind. Have you considered it?"

"Haven't you?"

Yes, but it was not worth mentioning to Westfield, so he snorted instead.

"Not even with the pretty Lady Josephine?"

Damien shrugged, as if that was explanation enough. And of course it would be. He was a notorious rake who possessed a dark reputation after all. Any woman should know better than be caught alone with him.

"Of course you did. I can see it in your eyes."

And that was in essence, the reason Damien loved his friend. He managed to see right through the façade Damien presented to the world.

"If I considered it," Damien muttered, "it was only because I considered what it would feel like to live in a constant nightmare for the rest of my miserable life."

"Surely marriage cannot be that bad."

"I'm sure it isn't," Damien drawled, pouring them more brandy, "it's the nagging and responsibility that sticks in my craw."

Westfield laughed. "Ever the optimist."

Damien watched his friend rub his temple. "Ready to call it a night," he taunted. "You look as if you are ready to pass out."

"Of course not. We still have rumors to spread."

"That bad, huh?"

"Devil of a headache since she put her hounds on me."

"Nothing cures a headache quite like drowning it in spirits."

"Right," Westfield murmured. "It's only the bad stuff that worsens

the headache.”

“I’ll have you know that nothing enters these lips of mine but the best.”

“We’ll have to spread the rumors at Whites,” Westfield muttered, distracted. “It’s where all the fortune hunters hang out, seemingly to keep up appearances.”

“Really? There is something of which you wish to inform me?” Damien asked in a teasing manner.

Westfield’s grin appeared lopsided. “Evelyn’s dowry has crippled my finances.”

“Then I shall beat Grey to a pulp again for marrying your sister.”

“As I recall, there was no victor in that brawl of yours.”

Damien scoffed, “Only because it would not have been fair beating up a man with no skill.”

“I’ll take your word for it. After all, you are the expert in the craft of brawling. You seem to be doing it at an alarming rate.”

“Only when it touches me personally,” Damien declared.

Westfield smiled. “Now that’s revealing.”

Damien pretended not to hear him and got up, swaying on his feet.

“Are you certain we’ll make it to the front door?” Westfield murmured, now also swaying toward the exit.

Damien swallowed, fog filling his brain. He closed his eyes for a moment. How many glasses of brandy had they consumed? Westfield only arrived...well, not that long ago, so why were they both swaying like some drunken peasants? He regarded his friend through hazy eyes. “Westfield, are you well?” Damien asked, rubbing his temples where a headache threatened to pierce his skull.

“I’m fine,” he slurred. “Just a headache.”

“Never get them,” Damien muttered, plopping down on the sofa again, realizing they were in no condition to leave tonight.

Westfield slumped down next to him, his hands rubbing both his temples. “Bloody hell, what happened to that brandy?”

Damien closed his eyes, willing his own headache to go away as a rush of exhaustion settled over him. He even attempted to count, but could not remember what came after the number three. Five? “Must’ve been a bad batch.”

“Lucky us.”

Yes, lucky them, he thought, before he passed out.

Chapter 10

Bond Street was filled with people milling about, going about their business. Ladies and gentlemen alike cluttered the cobblestones, girls shopping for bonnets and men indulging them. Other, less fortunate men shouted at one another from across the street while an old lady hobbled along the edge, waving her cane at some lord when he accidentally stepped in front of her path. All were unsuspecting of the hell about to break loose.

Yet at that precise moment inside a small dressmakers shop, Lady Josephine and Lady Belle posed as shop girls, attending to the Countess of Ardmore in a calm and orderly manner, oblivious to what was happening outside. Well, not entirely oblivious. Not even the Countess recognized them, for they wore wigs and dressed in simple peasant attire. And why would anyone spare a closer glance at them? No one would ever believe a lady would pretend to be anything but a lady.

It was genius.

A few feet away from the shop, James Shaw busied himself loading a cart of boxes and crates, appearing to the untrained eye as just another merchandiser going about his affairs. The women passing the street, however, had trouble keeping their gazes off his big form, openly admiring him while he worked and he pretended not to note their stares.

Somewhere at the back of the shop, Craven swaggered. To anyone who passed him, he appeared a drunken, bedraggled and dirty fool, swaying up and down the alleyway, shouting for his Matilda to come home.

All this seemed quite comforting, except that somewhere in the crowd, the Middletons prepared to put their plan into action, which according to Poppy Middleton, would be a grand affair.

Lady Constance, on the other hand, was not aware of any of this as she made her way through the crowd to the dress shop, her guards following closely behind. She had no idea today would be the day she'd be set free from the clutches of the man who'd forced her into marriage, and with a little luck, she would never need to worry about him and his cruelty again.

Jo and Belle had but a few precious moments to convince Lady Constance they were her saviors and to play along. If she did not, well they weren't above shoving laudanum down her throat if the lady did not cooperate.

Lady Constance entered the shop only moments after the Countess of Ardmore departed and Jo's heart sank at the look of utter

acceptance on the poor woman's face. Dark smudges marked the hollows under her eyes, no doubt caused by lack of sleep, and her cheeks appeared hollowed out. Yet, still she remained pretty, with honey blonde hair and soft pale skin. She looked like any other lady might, except for her eyes. They spoke of pain and sorrow.

"Molly," Jo called to Belle, "we've another customer."

With a shaky breath, Jo made her way over to Lady Constance, Belle following on her heels. "My lady," she murmured with a smile. "How may we help you today?"

"I wish to select some new material for riding habits."

"Of course, please follow us," Belle said with a kind smile.

Lady Constance brows furrowed together, glancing around the shop at all the material displayed.

"Oh, we've new stock that may interest you," Jo said when she noted Lady Constance hesitate.

Belle nudged Jo.

"My lady, if you please," Belle motioned to the back.

Oh yes, they were supposed to be peasants.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt," Lady Constance stammered.

A wealth of meaning lay behind that stammer and Jo wished she could wrap her hands around Cartwright's throat. They made their way toward one of the back rooms, one which had a door that led to the back entrance of the shop.

Once in, Belle shut the door with a resounding click, never leaving her post in front of it, in case Lady Constance decided to dash off.

"What is going on?" The lady asked when her eyes flicked across the room, no material in sight, only boxes for storage.

"Lady Constance, we are here to kidnap you," Belle said, rather to the point.

"What?" the lady asked, her tone horrified and her hands starting to shake.

"Belle! You needn't put it that way," Jo admonished.

"How else am I to put it?"

Jo ignored her, turning toward a now frightened Lady Constance. "I know this may sound strange, but we are not here to kidnap you, we have come to rescue you."

"I don't understand."

"Let me put it this way, we are a group of individuals who aid people that are in trouble to either disappear and start a new life, or as in your case, hand you over to your family."

Hope blossomed in Lady Constance eyes before it disappeared again. "My husband will kill you. There are guards. Even now they stand watch outside the store. They will never allow me to leave with

you.”

“Not to worry, we are aware of your husband’s men and have planned accordingly,” Jo reassured her, but kept her eye on the lady for any sign that she might bolt.

“In a few minutes, there will be a commotion that will draw every eye in the vicinity, including your guards, but only for a few seconds. So we need to be ready and have your full cooperation for this to work,” Belle said in way of explanation.

“But where will I go?”

“The Duke of Richmond has been notified and will send someone to collect you.”

“Richmond is part of this?” Lady Constance asked, hopeful once again.

“Yes,” Jo lied. “But he must keep his distance until this is over or your husband will suspect him.”

“But who are you?”

Jo and Belle exchanged a glance. “For now, that is not important, what is important is to not get caught. You will go to the country and wait for him to send for you.”

“I can’t believe this is truly happening.”

Jo wiped a tear from her cheek. “It’s best if you are not aware of all the details, but once your husband has been taken care of and it’s safe to come back, you will have friends amongst you.”

“I am with child.”

They stilled at that news. “Does your husband know?”

Lady Constance nodded. “Yes, he will never stop until he finds me. He will hunt me down to the ends of the earth.”

“He won’t be alive to do so,” Belle muttered in an ominous voice and Lady Constance’s eyes widened at the sound of the pleasure in her voice.

“Do not mind her, my lady. She’s a blood thirsty one,” Jo said, her eyes dancing with laughter.

“So I see. What exactly is your plan after this commotion occurs?”

“We will stuff you in a cart and get you out of London,” Belle supplied.

The lady blinked, a smile tugging at her lips. “Of course.”

“When will we know the commotion has started?”

The question barely left her lips when a deafening noise sounded, followed by shouts and shrieks alike, not one or two, but a hundred it seemed.

“That will be our cue,” Belle said with a wicked smile as she led them to the back entrance of the shop. “This way, if you please.”

Jo stepped onto the street where all hell had broken loose.

An explosion outside the abandoned building across the street had caused a thick smoke cloud to descend as the flames licked up the building. People who had obviously dropped to the floor during the explosion, jumped to their feet, screaming and shouting, some viewing in horror as the building took fire with rapid force. Some scrambled, shouting for all to fetch buckets of water to contain blazing embers. Jo saw James wading through the crowd to reach the building. She spotted Craven, a solemn look on his face as he climbed in front of their escape cart, ready to set off at a moment's notice. They had managed to disguise Lady Constance, now dressed as a boy, and helped her to climb in between the crates on the cart, cleverly arranged to fit and conceal them from view.

"James! We need to leave," Jo hissed from between the crates when she spotted him.

"Miss Middleton is in that building," he said, nodding in the direction of the burning construction. Already people carried buckets of water to contain the flames, but one of the Middleton sisters had yet to emerge.

"What!" Belle screeched, trying to climb back out.

"Craven, go." James ordered. "I will get her out."

"But—" Belle started to interrupt but Jo silenced her.

"James will bring her to safety Belle, he won't let any harm befall her. I will retrieve your cousins, but you must take care of Lady Constance."

Lady Belle did not argue, but instead settled back between the crates, concerned and silent.

"I promise I will bring them all to safety," James murmured before he retreated back into the crowd of panicked citizens. Jo followed, keeping pace alongside him. Not an easy feat. His legs were so much longer and his strides bigger than hers.

"Are you certain she's inside, James?" Jo asked with concern.

He gave a curt nod. "She lost her balance and may not have gotten away from the explosion fast enough."

"I see Willow and Holly. I'll retrieve them and meet you down on the corner of Cavendish Square where our coach is waiting," Jo said, her voice laced with emotion.

James nodded, not wasting anymore time before he charged through the burning building, uncaring of the heat and smoke threatening to suffocate him, in search of Poppy Middleton.

Josephine stared in utter devastation as Willow comforted a sobbing Holly. Her own emotions bordered on hysterics. What if Poppy had been hurt? What if she died? How would she ever forgive herself if anything happened to that poor girl?

And Belle... She would blame herself, even though it was by no fault of hers. They had all known the plan entailed producing gunpowder and that it would be dangerous mixing chemicals, but Poppy had ensured them the batch would be diluted and would serve only for a distracting noise.

"It's all my fault!" Holly sobbed, pulling Jo from her thoughts. "I collided with her too hard. I shouldn't have run so fast."

"It's not your fault. Poppy just lost her balance, that's all," Willow comforted, tears in her own eyes.

"Because of me!"

Jo did not know how much longer she could take the suspense. If James didn't show up soon she would head back to look for him.

"I'm sure they're fine, Holly," Jo said gently. "Poppy will not let something as mundane as fire haul her under."

Holly smiled through her tears. "No, she will not."

Just then, the door of the carriage flew open and James climbed inside, an unconscious Poppy, dangling from his arms. Holly and Willow both gasped at the sight of their sister before Holly burst into tears again.

"Is she still alive?" Willow whispered. Her voice shook with fear.

"Yes, but she wouldn't have been had I arrived moments later. What the hell happened?"

"Everything had gone just like we practiced at home, but the batch of gunpowder must not have been diluted enough."

"It burned down a building, so I would say not," James snapped, still cradling Poppy in his arms, readjusting in his seat so that she might be more comfortable.

"My sister has never before made a mistake. It should have been contained to the wagon. We must've taken the wrong barrel."

Jo sighed when James glared at Willow, and Willow only stared calmly back. She noticed the way he held Poppy, his fingers stroking gently over her hair. He didn't seem to even notice the action. "James, this is not the time to argue."

Those fiery eyes locked with her. "This is the perfect time, Josephine. Where the hell did you get the gunpowder?" James asked. The always smiling man now hard and unrelenting.

Willow shrugged, not intimidated. "We made it."

"You made it?" He sounded incredulous.

"Well, Poppy made it. I was never any good at mixing chemicals though the recipe is simple enough with only sulfur, powder coal and saltpeter. I could never get the amount of each right. Poppy has always been exceptional at mixing powders." Willow glanced at her unconscious sister with pride. "My father even allows her to assist him."

“You father should be strung from his—”

“James!” Jo scolded. “Everything turned out well enough.”

“She could have died, Josephine, all because her father is a fruitcake.”

Holly chuckled through her tears. “He is a bit nutty.”

Willow sighed. “I’ll admit my father is a curious man, but his intentions have always been good.”

“She’s alive, and that is all that matters,” Jo said, directing a pointed stare at James. He lifted his upper lip in a snarl and looked away, leaving Jo to stare out of the window as she had no desire to look at Poppy’s unconscious form on his lap and be reminded of how they’d almost lost her.

Chains rattled and hooves pounded as they traveled through the streets of London, until they halted at the back entrance of Belle’s home, where her cousins also resided. Belle was waiting for them when they arrived, frantic with worry as she rushed to the carriage.

Poppy had at least gained semi-consciousness though Jo couldn’t tell if she was aware of her surroundings or not. She only muttered unintelligently about black powder and smoke. Belle grabbed Poppy by the face, inspecting every inch of her as James put her back on her feet, still holding onto her arms, but letting her body rest against his when her knees gave out.

“Poppy! You scared me to death! Are you all right?”

Poppy’s head wobbled as she tried to nod. “Fine... give... minute. Damn... headache.”

“Well,” Belle huffed, though the concern did not quite leave her eyes, “If you can curse, then you must be fine.”

“Of course she’ll be fine,” Willow said, embracing her sister in a hug.

“What happened?” Belle asked.

“The batch was a bit too strong.”

“A bit? It set a building on fire,” James muttered.

Jo interrupted before tempers started too exploded as well. “We will speak of it later, for now everyone should rest.”

Willow nodded and took Poppy’s hand. “Are you able to walk on your own?” Poppy’s nod was weak but determined.

Jo stared as James reluctantly let go of her and Poppy carefully made her way forward, both her sisters coming up beside her in case she should fall.

“Thank you for saving my cousin,” Belle said to James.

He just nodded.

Watching them disappear into the house Jo murmured, “I have a bad feeling, James.”

“I know, but there is nothing we can do about it now.”

Even so, Jo still couldn't shake the feeling that their lives had just been set on a course that could not be undone. They would have to account for what happened today. Soon.

Chapter 11

Josephine entered the theatre on Drury Lane for no other reason than keeping up appearances, and of course to see whether Cartwright would be in attendance. She was accompanied by Lady Evelyn and Lord Grey, about the only man her brother tolerated, and only because he'd married her best friend.

Neither her brother nor friend seemed to suspect her involvement in the fire, which appeared to be the topic on everyone's lips these past two days. Speculation ran rampant along with whispers of Lady Constance's disappearance. Though no connection between the two events had been made, it did not mean Cartwright would not make it. Many rumors of Lady Constance's disappearance revolved around the Duke of Richmond, but the most popular theory held that she ran away because the pressure of marriage to a merchant had become too much.

Jo, however, still reeled over the events that had transpired. The Middletons had, without intending to, truly outdone themselves. The act itself not as magnificent as the events it led to, all seemingly accidental according to the papers. The papers also raved of a mysterious hero who ran into the burning building to rescue a child. Everyone speculated about their identity now as well. Even forums dedicated to uncover their identities had been formed. When no man came forward to claim the title of hero, suspicions of staged events had circled.

But while the distraction worked better than they had hoped for, especially because of all the gossip and attention, the ramifications remained unclear. Jo's instincts warned of an unseen danger.

Hence the reason she was wasting precious time attending the theatre. She wanted to see Cartwright's face for herself. With Lady Constance tucked away from harm at Green Rose Cottage, one of Jo's family estates, where could the harm be? She'd been told that the duke would take care of Cartwright, would eliminate him, but Jo would be at peace only once she attended his funeral.

A small hand touched her arm. "Are you all right?" Evelyn whispered, having taken note of her pensive expression with a frown.

"Of course, why would I not be?"

"You look kind of green," Evelyn murmured.

"What?"

"Not green as in green, but green as in a pale."

"Pale? Would I not appear white then?"

"Oh, you know what I mean. Now stop avoiding my question. What's amiss?"

"It's nothing, Brahm and I argued." Not a lie since she and her brother fought all the time. She hated withholding things from her friend, but until the consequences of rescuing Lady Constance became clear, Evelyn's safety was more important.

"Your brother is a man of deep passions," Evelyn remarked.

"True, but I wish he would direct those passions somewhere more appropriate."

"We should find him a wife."

Jo laughed, but it sounded forced even to her own ears.

"Are you certain that you're all right?" Evelyn asked, now openly concerned.

No simpleton, her friend had always been able to sense when something troubled Jo. "All is fine. My brother is being more stubborn than usual. A wife would do him good."

Evelyn nodded and Jo relaxed. Somewhat. She continued to study the faces in the crowd, hoping to spot one in particular. She had not seen St. Aldwyn since he came to call on her. That had been days ago. Jo wished she'd asked him to be part of their project instead of Craven. But St. Aldwyn would attempt to stop her, not assist her in her endeavors.

Yet, Jo still considered him a friend, a vital part of her life. It seemed odd to regard him as such and regretful that she could never tell him her secrets.

"Oh, we will find him someone suitable. But I daresay that won't stop him from meddling in your life. There is bound to be something you will do to spur his temper on."

Jo gave a low chuckle. By the way her brother danced around the Middletons to avoid their advances, Jo doubted Evelyn would have much luck.

"Just don't let him suspect it was my idea, or he'll send me away."

Evelyn eyes lighted with amusement. "Your brother loves you too much to send you away. He would be lost without you."

"He has an odd way of showing it."

"Not so odd, I would imagine. Your brother, like most men, simply cannot fathom why any woman would wish to remain unmarried. Men cannot wrap their minds around the independent spirit of a woman. I am convinced they are incapable of it."

"Your husband has done well," Jo pointed out.

"Has he? I very much doubt that. But I've learned to share my independence with him, as he is trying to do so with me."

"My brother would never do that."

"Of course not. You are his sister. He wishes you happily married."

Jo only snorted.

"You can always run off with a gentleman so you won't have to live under your brother's thumb anymore."

"In other words I would trade one impossible male for a lessor impossible male? I can't say I'm comfortable with the odds."

Evelyn gurgled as she attempted to suppress her laugh. "Oh, I don't know. Marriage is not as bad as I presumed it would be."

"You are in love."

"You could always come live with me."

Jo lips twitched. "Oh, he would drag me arms flailing out your door. He has outright refused to marry until I do."

Her friend gaped in disbelief. "What?"

"Oh yes. He came right out and said if I did not marry, neither would he. Apparently it doesn't matter that he has a duty to beget an heir, he is determined to prove a point."

Evelyn shook her head. "Perhaps he's taken his brotherly duty a bit too far."

"I'll say," Jo muttered.

"What do you suppose spurred him to make such a declaration?"

"Oh, I do not suppose, I'm well aware—the Middletons. He believes they are out to trap him into marriage and that I put them up to it."

"He's not far off."

"Regardless, he's wants to back me into a corner."

"He is determined."

"He has lost his mind."

"Who's lost his mind?" The throaty male voice of St. Aldwyn interrupted their conversation. Pleasure warmed Jo's blood. Would she ever escape this man? *Did she want to?* Her gaze traveled up to his handsome face, her heart skipping a beat at the sight of him. Memories of his lips pressed against hers assailed her. She really ought to latch onto some of his flaws, then perhaps her heart wouldn't start to race at the mere mention of his name, her knees wouldn't go weak in his presence and her soul would not long for something best left alone. Damn his rotten heart for being the one to produce such feelings in her. Feelings she did not wish to feel.

"Lady Josephine?" The lazy drawl came again, but this time more alert. "Or were you perhaps talking about me?" He tilted his head to the side, his eyes alight with curiosity.

"Of course not," Jo scoffed. "That you lost your mind is old news, I was referring to my brother and his vow to remain unwed for as long as I do."

He lifted an amused brow. "I am certain you did not take his statement well."

Jo shrugged. "He will die holding his breath. I have no desire to marry."

"And why is that, my lady?"

Jo glanced over to Evelyn for help but her friend quickly lifted her hand to wave at some old fodder that stood a few feet away from her. Traitor.

"I have no use for a husband." A husband would demand she give up her projects.

"Surely there are uses for a husband to be desired?"

Did he mean the act of seduction? It held some undeniable margin of appeal. But one may enjoy an intimate connection with a man without being married. Jo's lips curved into a wicked smile. The prospect of being seduced by St. Aldwyn did hold delicious appeal.

She pondered teasing him with talk of seducing Craven, but disregarded the notion. She found (to her surprise) she did not wish to anger the man gazing down at her with such heated eyes.

"Why are you smiling like that?"

The suspicion in his voice caused Evelyn to choke back a laugh. "I daresay trouble brews in her mind," her friend murmured with a smile.

With relief, Jo caught sight of Holly bouncing toward them, a look of shock on her pixie like face. "Lady Josephine, Lady Evelyn, I've just learned the most disturbing news."

"What is it, Holly?" Jo asked, aware of what news Holly must have learned as well as that the girl had no idea she'd been party to it.

"Lady Constance has been kidnapped and her husband has put out a reward of a thousand pounds for anyone with knowledge of her disappearance."

Jo's stomach tightened. *A thousand pounds.*

"How can that be?" Evelyn murmured, her expression shocked.

Jo forced herself not to react to the news of the reward, only feigning concern by crunching up her brows. "That's awful. But kidnapping? Perhaps she ran away."

Holly nodded. "Yes, her husband's quite certain. I've even heard rumors he accused the Duke of orchestrating the entire affair."

"But they are family?" Evelyn said, her frown deepening. "Why would he kidnap his own niece?"

Holly dropped her voice an octave, peering around to make sure no one overheard her. "There are rumors that they have never gotten along, and that the Duke did not give his blessing for the union."

"I've heard rumors of that sort as well," Evelyn confessed in a soft whisper.

A sudden grip on Jo's arms drew her attention away from the conversation to St. Aldwyn. Suspicion clouded his features as he

pulled her to the side, his face an unreadable mask.

“Josephine—” He began then broke off with a sigh. “Did you have anything to do with the disappearance of Lady Constance?”

Josephine’s smile flattened, but she kept it in place. After all, had she not expected this? It hardly mattered whether he suspected her or not, it was done. “I can’t say that I did.”

“Can’t say or won’t admit to it?”

“Both.”

His eyes narrowed on her. “If rumors are to be believed, Lady Constance disappeared in broad daylight. Her husband is out for murder.”

“In broad daylight?”

“Yes, she vanished into thin air after an old abandoned building caught on fire. It was ruled to be an accident, an unfortunate chain of events, I believed they called it.”

Jo widened her eyes. “Why that’s horrible! But I daresay such things happen all the time.”

“No, my lady, they do not.”

“Well perhaps not all the time, but if Lady Constance disappeared into thin air, as you put it, why is her husband attending the opera?”

“Keeping up appearances, I would imagine. Why are you here, Lady Josephine?” Suspicion etched clear in his tone. “Your lack of culture is common knowledge. You rarely, if ever, attend.”

Lack of culture? Why, the buffoon. “True, I have no love for the theatre, but Evelyn asked me to join her and I accepted. Not that I have to explain anything to you, my lord,” Jo said, her smile thin.

“I do not give a damn about Lady Constance.” He grabbed her shoulders and leaned closer until inches separated them. “This is not a game. Her husband is offering a suitcase of gold to anyone with information regarding her whereabouts. If he even suspects you had anything to do with her disappearance, he will have your head.”

Jo shrugged out of his grip. “Then it’s a good thing I had nothing to do with her disappearance. Has it ever occurred to you that she may have run away on her own? That perhaps she’d not been happy in her marriage?”

“Blast it. This has you written all over it.”

“No,” Jo whispered, shifting a little so that her body leaned toward his. Suddenly, all thoughts of the kidnapping vanished when she recognized the desire reflected in his eyes. Her gaze dropped to his lips. “It is possible that she gave up her suffocating life for a more pleasurable lifestyle with a lover, but that does not mean I had anything to do with it.”

That gained his full attention. “I beg your pardon?”

A wicked glint entered Jo’s eyes. “Or perhaps she ran away

alone.”

“Lady Constance does not strike me as the sort to run away with a lover.”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

He grinned. “I have devoted a lifetime to the study of females.”

“Learning how best to get them into your bed, no doubt,” she countered with a dry voice, but she did not give him the chance to reply before she went on, “At any rate, whether she ran away with a lover or not is irrelevant, but I wager she consorted with a gypsy, and everybody knows that gypsies do not ask, they take and ravish,” she teased.

His gaze dropped to where she bit her lower lip.

“Gypsy cultures aren’t widely known, so how did you come about the information they kidnap their women and ravish them?”

“I read,” her smiled widened. “Or perhaps I’m acquainted with a gypsy.”

“Not likely, my dear.”

Jo shrugged. “Regardless, I was not involved.”

“You’d better not have been. Her husband’s a dangerous man.”

“And I’m a cautious woman.”

Damien snorted. “Now there’s a lie if I’ve ever heard one.

“I would have thought, after your incessant meddling, you would understand me by now.”

Damien leaned closer, causing her breath to hitch. “I understand you all too well and would like to believe you are sincere, but you’re friends with the Shaw brothers.”

“James?” Jo asked at a loss.

“Don’t be obtuse. Their reputations are as black as the night. While I may bear in mind your lack of connection, I do not have the same faith in James Shaw.”

“Well then, you shall have to take it up with him.”

“I am taking it up with you.”

Jo regarded Damien with guarded consideration. He appeared to be even more suspicious of them than she first imagined, but she wasn’t overly worried. What bothered her, however, was if someone like Damien pieced together the possibility of their actions, it only stood to reason a more determined individual, one such as Cartwright, would not be far behind.

James was a big man. If Cartwright learned his identity, it would only be a matter of time before he learned of the other disappearances. And he would learn of their friendship. If Damien could unearth pieces with some enquiries, imagine what someone like Cartwright, who would use force and violence, would unearth.

“Josephine? Was Shaw involved?”

Jo's attention snapped back to Damien, her heart constricting at the concern she saw there. Dark circles lined his eyes.

"Of course not, it must have been the duke. It is a family matter."

She watched him mull over her statement, testing it between the walls of his mind. It made sense that the duke would take care of his own family affairs. Jo tried not to shift under his intent gaze. She also tried not to notice how lovely his eyes sparkled when he happened to be in one of his moods. Her eyes drifted to his lips again. Flaws. Focus on his flaws.

"Why do you look as if you haven't slept for days?" Jo asked.

He appeared taken aback by her question and shook his head. "Bad batch of brandy, passed right out after a few. Are you trying to distract me from the matter at hand?" he asked, his tone taking on a more sensual note.

Jo inwardly cursed at the sensation that rippled down her spine. "No, I'm just taking note of all your flaws." And not informing him that James was behind his bad batch.

"Flaws?" He blinked at that unexpected answer.

"You have an abundance of them."

"Let us hear them then."

"Oh, the list is too long, perhaps another time."

"Now," he demanded.

"Jo!" Evelyn interrupted, drawing their attention away from each other. "We must to take our seats."

Jo breathed in a sigh of relief, but managed a wicked smile. "It would seem now you'll never know the flaws I see."

"This conversation isn't over," Damien whispered in her ear before she strolled away, leaving him to stand alone.

Indeed, he would now hound her until she listed every one of his flaws. She may even enjoy every moment of it. Perhaps she would make him earn her answers. Trouble was, his flaws weren't flaws at all. To Jo, they formed part of the parcel that made up the man.

She shook her head as she followed Evelyn to their seats. Damien had become an obsession in her traitorous mind. She took her seat, her eyes roaming the faces in the opposite boxes until they found the person she'd ventured out for.

Cartwright.

He sat in a box opposite to her, his eyes not once leaving the stage where the play had yet to begin. It gave her the opportunity to study his features. By no means could he be considered an ugly man, but cruelty carved into his face like an iron mask.

Jo's body visibly shuddered.

It was how she would imagine death to look like if death had a face. She'd never noticed it before now, but then, she'd never given it

much thought. Her gaze drifted to his companion as she could not bear to gaze upon that merciless face a moment longer.

Her blood turned to ice.

Beside Cartwright, sat the last woman she ever expected to see—the Countess of Ardmore. The same woman Josephine and Belle had attended to in the shop.

Jo diverted her gaze to the stage, away from the couple. She did not dare reveal her shock. A sense of foreboding crept up her spine and settled in her heart. The play began, and with the one man who possessed the power to make her feel safe nowhere in sight, she sighed and resigned herself to her fate.

Chapter 12

Lady Josephine came to a halt in front of the steps of Derek Shaw's residence, not to drag her feet, but to take in the splendor of the brick building. Bricks held an odd fascination for Jo. Small in size, when put together in an expert and artful manner, they created fortifiable constructions. Yes, Jo admired bricks. She found them to be much simpler than the brick seated behind his desk, no doubt, waiting for her arrival. Not that she was afraid of Derek Shaw. She, in fact, welcomed a fight. The only problem was Derek Shaw never fought. He lectured. And then in such a condescending manner it drove both Jo and James up the walls.

Like they were errant children.

With a determined set of her shoulders, Jo ascended the stairs. Before she reached the top the door swung open to reveal the butler. Of course, Derek's servants would be as competent as he, so competent, it seemed as if they possessed the power of foresight. That or the butler hid by the window surveying the entrance all day.

"Lady Josephine, how good of you to visit," the butler said, unfailingly polite as he appeared gruff.

Jo regarded him with a small smile. "I've been summoned Magnus, as you're well aware. You sent the summons."

"Of course, my lady, his lordship will be glad to see you."

Jo strolled passed Magnus, not waiting to be directed toward the study Derek awaited her in. She did not, however, expect to also find James, seated in front of his brother's desk, an implacable mask on his face.

"Well, fancy seeing you here," he said as she entered the room.

The edges of her mouth curled.

"James," she greeted with mock wariness. "I see I'm just in time."

"You're late," Derek countered in a flat voice, but Jo paid him no heed as she took a seat beside James, who had shifted his attention back to his surly brother.

"Brother dearest, oh how I've missed your charming countenance."

Jo stifled a laugh.

"I trust you are aware why I've summoned you," Derek began.

Summoned. Jo did not answer. Neither did James. Of course they knew why they'd been summoned. They'd proceeded on a project without the king's consent.

Jo arched a delicate brow. She might be small, but she never backed down from a fight. Their silence only seemed to spark Derek's temper, for his stare narrowed and turned glacial.

“Do you have nothing to say?”

James shrugged and flicked his eyes to her. She scrunched her face up in a thoughtful manner, pretending to consider Derek’s question before shaking her head with an innocent no.

“I see.”

“I doubt that, brother,” James murmured.

“You acted without my consent.”

“I was not aware we required your consent.”

Silence greeted James’s statement, and the tension in the room intensified.

“We sent a note,” Jo said, her chin lifting.

“Ah yes, the note. I do recall receiving one,” Derek replied, his angular jaw clenched hard.

“At least we took the time to send you one,” James said, his tone defensive.

Jo agreed. They could have left him out altogether.

“An opportunity presented itself and we seized it,” she murmured.

Those steely eyes rested on her. “Your opportunity, as you put it, was nothing but a devil’s trap.”

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, her brow furrowed.

“He means,” James cut in before his brother could answer, “we are idiots who screwed up and will, no doubt, be caught.”

“It was the best we could do under the circumstances,” Jo snapped. From the corner of her eye she glimpsed James’s eyes widen when his brother inhaled sharply, his chest expanding. The veins in his neck bulged as he rose, furious eyes pinned on her. His voice like steel when he whispered, “Under the circumstances, Josephine? What, if I may dare to ask, comprised these circumstances? Did they include imminent death? Or include you involving half of London in your plan? Were these circumstances so dire that it necessitated the attempt to burn down the city? And who came up with the plan to parade as shop assistants where scores of hungry urchins may identify you later for a few coins?”

“I wore a wig,” Jo muttered.

“A wig? And how will a wig help you if by some chance Cartwright commissions an artist to draw a sketch of your face? Which is beyond doubt what Cartwright shall do?”

“You cannot know that, brother,” James defended.

Derek’s big shoulders shrugged. “It is what I would have done.”

Jo stared into the calculating eyes of Derek Shaw and saw the truth of his words. *It is what I would have done.* A simple statement, but the weight of it slammed down on her like waves hitting the shore. A glance in James’ direction revealed he too, saw the truth of it. Yet, Jo wanted to believe their plan had been a solid one. Even if anyone

sketched her face, it would be distorted by the lapse of time, would it not? And what of their wigs and drab attire, not even the Countess of Ardmore had recognized her.

Perhaps they should have waited for Derek's return, but it remained pointless to dwell on it now. Their plan hadn't failed yet.

"Well, forgive us for not taking into account that someone might sketch us, but our plan worked," James replied.

"That remains to be seen. Your harebrained idea has yet to run its full course, James," Derek bit out.

"It happened to be my idea," Jo muttered.

"Irrelevant. My brother should have known better, Josephine. And you should never have included your friends."

"Oh?" Jo said, somewhat surprised by his coldness. "I suppose James should have done everything all by himself?"

Frosty eyes narrowed on her. "He should not have done anything. And now Craven is aware of our activities as well."

"He approached us."

Derek actually looked surprised by her words. "How did he even know—wait, do not answer that." His hand rose to rub the bridge of his nose. "I want the names of every person who assisted you."

"Well, Belle—"

A sound akin to a growl of a beast stopped her mid-sentence.

"Of course it wasn't enough that you already involved a man like Craven, you had to include some foolish chit," Derek snapped, the first sign his hold on his temper was slipping.

James sat up straighter. "You forget yourself brother. What's done is done."

"And burning down a building?"

"Necessary to distract Cartwright's men," James muttered darkly.

"Oh? And who plotted that spectacular event?"

"Belle's cousins," Jo answered, cringing at the sarcasm dripping from Derek's tone.

"Ah."

"I thought it to be quite splendid," James said.

"Yes," Derek agreed. "So splendid, it was labeled a chain of unfortunate events. But Cartwright does not strike me as a man to pay heed to the garbage written in the papers. Not when it coincides with the same day as the disappearance of his wife. What happens when those girls are recognized? Whose door will Cartwright knock on first?"

James cursed. "Bloody hell."

Derek's smile lacked humor. "Like I said, a harebrained plan."

Jo rose to her feet, unable to sit any longer and be regarded as a wayward child. "So our plan possessed some flaws. We can work from

there.”

“And what do you propose we do?” Derek asked curiously. “Short of killing Cartwright, there’s not much else except leave town.”

“We can direct him on another path,” Jo suggested.

“Perhaps, my lady, if you had not sent Lady Constance to your family estate. But Cartwright’s eyes and ears are everywhere. It will be a miracle if she arrived without being recognized along the way. We need to be prepared for the worst.”

Jo did not miss the “we” in his words. He may be furious but he would not abandon them to their folly.

“What a mess.” She shot James an unhappy look. “I told you something did not feel right.”

James had the sense to look contrite. “Richmond will take care of Cartwright.”

Derek snorted. “You do not know? He tried, word has it. But the man he sent after Cartwright was found drifting head down in the Thames.”

Jo gasped at that news.

“Hell,” James muttered.

“We must get Belle’s cousins to safety,” Jo said, her voice reflecting the horror on her face. “There are too many lives at stake.”

“First, were there any more people involved?” He gave Jo a pointed glance.

She shook her head. “We have given you all the names. We maintained a small circle.”

“Small?” Derek said in disbelief. “You could start a circus act with the amount of clowns that participated. I don’t think you understand the magnitude of what you set in motion.” Derek stared at her hard before he continued. “If Cartwright learns the truth, everyone you’ve come in contact with these last months will be put under his scrutiny and he alone will decide who assisted his wife to disappear.”

Jo paled, but he refused to spare her. “That includes your and your friend’s lovelorn beaux. Cartwright may very well believe them part of this whole project. They must be informed and as much as I hate to say this, your brother should as well.”

A silent protest welled up in Jo’s throat. St. Aldwyn she could manage, but her brother would never listen to reason. She’d be lucky if she did not end up in the Thames too.

Sensing her inner battle, Derek sighed. “Your life is in danger and your brother has the right to protect you.”

“He will send me away and make it his life’s mission to destroy you. It won’t matter whether he’s wrong, or if you weren’t even here, he will have an axe out for you for the rest of your life.”

“I agree with her on this, brother,” James murmured.

“Then what do you propose we do?”

“We do what we can without informing her brother until there is no other option than to include him. Perhaps, if we are lucky, there will be no need. If he learns the truth there’s no telling what he will do. He’s all emotion, you know that.”

“Fine, but if things get too out of hand he will be informed.”

“Thank you,” Jo whispered.

“I’ve agreed not to tell him Josephine, but that doesn’t mean your pup following you about won’t when you inform him of the danger.”

Jo stilled at that news. “I must do it?”

“I’m certainly not about to do it,” Derek said with a dry voice.

Jo inwardly groaned. Now that they agreed not to tell her brother the concept of that particular conversation with St. Aldwyn spanned before her like the endless sea. For the most part because she’d lied to him at the theatre. But she understood why it needed to be done, just as she hoped he wouldn’t take it too disagreeably. But none of that mattered; the only thing that mattered was that Cartwright never learned the truth. Maybe Richmond would deal with his in-law before it ever came to that.

Damien leaned against his carriage and glared at the Shaw residence, which Josephine had entered more than two hours ago. Shortly after James Shaw, which meant his brother had arrived back in town. Not certain what to make of this, he decided it must be some kind of monthly gathering of troublemakers. It set his nerves on edge, however, not knowing the extent of their relationship with Josephine.

So how did he get to the point of lurking, once again, in the shadows? Fate? Divine intervention? Or just luck?

He’d decided to drive by Josephine’s residence—a more expeditious route home—and saw her emerge from the side of her house wearing a bright red cloak. In fact, he might have missed her all together if it had not been for her cloak. Of course, suspicions arose and instead of stopping to confront her, he followed the little wench, straight to the front door of Derek Shaw’s residence.

Damien had tried to ignore the jealousy threatening to consume him each moment Jo did not appear, but failed miserably. The knowledge of her in a house with two unattached men, unescorted and without a chaperone, drove him up the side of his carriage’s walls. A red hazy hue accompanied the knowledge. Another five minutes, that was all he would give her, then he’d break down the front door. To hell with caution.

Footsteps to his left drew his attention away from the building and Damien almost slumped to the ground when he caught sight of his friend approaching. About bloody time.

"I received your missive. What's happened?"

"Josephine is in there," Damien nodded in disgust toward the house.

Westfield arched a brow. "Alone?"

"Yes." Damien bit out. "Both brothers are there as well."

"Lady Belle?"

"No."

Damien heard the breath escape Westfield but said nothing. All his focus was trained on the door, willing Josephine to step through it.

"It seems I've arrived in the nick of time," Westfield noted, no doubt recognizing the expression on Damien's face. He heaved a heavy sigh. Yes, his friend had arrived in time to stop Damien from doing something he would regret.

"It's not unusual for them to meet," Westfield murmured. "But unusual does not begin to describe your behavior here, lurking outside the Shaw residence."

Damien shot Westfield a glare. "I thought you were interested in their doings as well."

"Perhaps, but I daresay you are not."

"Do you not find it suspicious that on the day of a fire, Lady Constance disappeared and a couple of days after that, Derek Shaw arrived back in town?"

"You suspect they were behind the events?" Westfield asked with a furrowed brow.

"I know they are."

"You asked her then?"

"She denied all knowledge."

"You did not believe her?"

Damien had and therein lay his problem. He'd believed her even when his gut roared he shouldn't. In the broader sense of things, a helpless victim and an abusive husband held all the appeal for a modern day vigilante. Perhaps if there had not been a fire, followed by a mysterious disappearance, Damien might have let it go, but he did not believe in coincidences.

"I believed her," Damien murmured. "Against my better judgment."

"What do your instincts say?"

"She was somehow involved. I just cannot fathom how a man would allow a woman to take part in such dangerous activities. A building burned to ashes, for saints' sake." He glanced over to Westfield. "But even if she'd been involved, it shouldn't matter. I have no right to meddle in her endeavors. It should not be my concern."

"But you are concerned?"

"Yes."

"The curse of the gentleman, I call it. It is badgered into us from birth we must protect the female species at all times because they are delicate and vulnerable. To allow a lady to participate in dangerous events remains inconceivable to us. Lady Belle insists the Shaws are not so barbaric."

"It's true."

"Is it?" Westfield asked. "You know their reputations. I wouldn't put it passed the likes of them."

"No," Damien corrected, his eyes narrowing on the front door. "I would not put it passed the women. They do not follow the dictations of men or society. And some may even call this curse, as you call it, obsession. It's unnatural."

"It's not and you are not obsessed."

"Fine, mad then. What is your excuse? I thought your interest lies only in saving damsels."

Westfield remained silent for a long moment before answered in a soft voice, "She called me a bore without any passion."

Damien lifted a brow at that. "She said that to your face?"

"No, she told my sister. I only overheard, but my temper got the better of me."

Damien's mouth curved into a smile. "Now you want to show her you're not a complete bore."

Westfield nodded.

"A dangerous game. One which may end in your ruin."

"Not as dangerous as the one you are playing."

"On the contrary, old friend, I have no need to worry on that score. The little lady has no inclination toward marriage and I have no intention of asking. What?" Damien asked as he caught sight of Westfield's expression.

His friend lifted his shoulders in a shrug. "I've no doubt in my mind that if you compromise Lady Josephine you would do right by her."

"You have a wistful mind, Westfield."

"Perhaps, but you are not the man you believe you are. You're one of the most honorable men I've met and you feel more for the chit than you will admit."

Did he? Damien would not deny the claim, but neither would he admit to it. He recalled the tragic end of his mother's life. Was Westfield right? Was he a better man than his father?

"Perhaps I also feel more than I care to admit. Ever since my sister married Grey, I've noticed the absence of...something. A void of sorts."

"Then perhaps you should marry. Lady Belle would make for the perfect wife."

“Saints no!” Westfield exclaimed. “I prefer a wife with a calming influence, but able to bring forth a raging passion. The only influence Lady Belle has is sparking my temper and the only passion she ignites is fury.”

Damien’s rich laughter filled the air, but sobered almost instantly. “The door is opening,” he said straightening and pushing Westfield further behind the carriage as he too moved out of sight. They both watched as Lady Josephine and James Shaw emerged from the house, descending the stairs before they paused at the side of the road.

“That went well,” they heard James Shaw mutter. They leaned forward to eaves drop on what was being said. They heard Lady Josephine sigh and watched as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

Damien’s lips tightened when she said, “Do you think Cartwright has figured it out yet? That we aided his wife?”

James shook his head. “But it won’t be long now.”

Damien stood motionless as he watched them walk with a brisk pace down the street, until they disappeared from his view. It felt as though his chest had taken a beating. She’d lied to him. She had looked him in the eye and lied. Thunder roared in his ears as his fists clenched at his side, tension riding him hard. They had put their lives in danger and Shaw had allowed it. Unacceptable.

“Dead men,” Westfield muttered darkly, fury evident in the lines of his face. “Perhaps it’s time to pay the women a visit, one they will not likely forget in a very long time.”

Damien smiled at the ominous note in Westfield’s voice. He’d just thought the same thing, a dark smile curving on his face. It was time this nonsense came to an end.

Chapter 13

Dinner was a silent affair in the Tremont residence that night, but not for any reason pertaining to recent events. A certain lord and his fervent kisses occupied Josephine's mind tonight. In the case of her brother, well, his brooding mood resolved around more duty bound matters. Lady Josephine took a sip of her soup, not tasting anything except watery peas.

Since her meeting earlier, she'd dwelled on little else and she contributed her reflections to the threat of death. It resulted in musings, such as: if she could do but one last thing before she died, what would she do? The answer always remained the same. Kiss Damien. So her thoughts had settled into a nice routine of recounting their last kiss.

In her defense, her daydreaming only started after she'd gone to inform Belle of her meeting with Derek Shaw. Her friend had seemed rather put out that she'd not been invited and demanded Jo related the meeting in detail. Her unhappiness, however, had been soon forgotten when Jo told of Derek Shaw's suspicions and she needed to inform Westfield. Belle had flatly refused to tell the Earl anything. Her friend's only concern resided over her cousins and Jo suggested they be sent home.

Josephine glanced at her brother, wondering at his dour mood. She dearly hoped he never learned of her latest endeavor. Perhaps after this nightmare was over she would refocus her efforts to find him a wife. A wife and child would do him good.

Her thoughts drifted toward Damien again. He too, would make an excellent father. A good husband? Well, she supposed that remained to be seen. First, she would warn him of the potential danger or perhaps she should kiss him before she imparted the truth. The chance of an unpleasant reaction may be slimmer.

In truth, Jo was less worried about his reaction to her involvement than what he would do when he learned Craven had participated in their project. Would there be another brawl? Saints, she hoped not.

Would he still kiss her? Maybe, but perhaps, it made more sense to kiss him first, and then part with the distressing news.

"Why does it look like someone stole your pastry?" Brahm interrupted her musings. He regarded her with mild interest.

"I'm not partial to pastries," Jo murmured.

"Fine, your favorite ribbon then."

Jo smiled at his disgruntled tone. "I'm just tired. It's been a long day."

“Oh? What have you been up to that’s so tiring?”

“Why shopping to replace my wayward ribbon, of course. A most daunting task.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

He seemed to want to say more but thought better of it.

“I’ve noticed you’ve been more absent at events. Are you out of sorts, brother?”

“Those damn chits haunt my every step.”

Jo hid her smile behind a spoon filled with watery pea soup.

“I heard Derek Shaw is back in town.”

Jo’s spoon froze half way to her parted lips and her eyes flew to his. So the reason for his dour mood revealed itself. His casual tone did not fool her.

“Oh?”

“Yes, he arrived this morning.”

“Well, good for him, I suppose.”

“Josephine.”

She set her spoon down. “What do you want me to say, Brahm? Yes, we’ve worked on charity cases together but beyond that we don’t care to meet for tea.”

“Stay away from him and his brother. I don’t want you anywhere near them.”

“James Shaw is my friend.”

“Friend?” Her brother lifted an infuriating brow. “Men are incapable of being friends with women.”

“Your views are rather archaic, are they not?”

“Stay away from them.”

“Shaw—”

“There is no *just* Shaw. Has everyone in this bloody kingdom forgotten that?” Brahm snapped.

Jo shot her brother a glare. “I suppose as much as you have forgotten they are good men.”

“They are dangerous, that is enough for me.”

Jo seethed inside, but she triumphed over the desire to lash out. In her heart she knew her brother only meant to protect her from harm, but he could be so bull headed at times. That he remained determined to suspect the worst of James mattered little; it was his lack of trust in her that needled her. She supposed she shouldn’t be surprised at his demand. Only that it took so long for him to make it.

In one swift motion she rose and threw her napkin on the table. “Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it’s time I take a husband. The first fool I come across will do just fine, if it means I get to leave this damn house.”

Brahm’s eyes narrowed on her, his chair scraping as he stood.

"Then go marry some bloody dandy if you wish. I'll be glad to pass the baggage over to someone else," he exploded, his voice bellowing through the room.

"You flatter me, brother!" Jo shouted back, stomping from the room.

Baggage was she? She'd show him baggage! In fact, she would pack hers this instant. She would not stay a moment longer under his wretched roof.

Reaching her room she slammed the door shut, and then opened it again to slam it once more for dramatic effect. Not dramatic enough, she decided and did so two times more before she slumped against it, furious. Josephine pushed away from the door and strode over to her armoire and started removing dresses and depositing them on her bed, then proceeded to drag her suitcase from under the bed.

Hah! She would like to see the look on his face once he realized she was gone. Though it may take him days to notice she'd left. He could stomp and bellow to his heart's content then.

Damien stared up Lady Josephine's bedroom, thinking it a devil's task to climb up to her window and sneak inside. But he was determined to do it, even if he got himself killed in the process. He planned to take her over his knee and give her the spanking she deserved. Then he would demand answers, if her tempting lips did not distract him from his task.

An image of Josephine in nothing but her nightgown flashed through his mind. For months he'd been attempting to rid his mind of these wicked thoughts to no avail. He bit back a growl of annoyance. Damn it, why her? A virgin for Christ's sake. Beautiful yes, but that had never been a requirement. He distrusted beautiful women, yet Jo's unusual beauty was oddly comfortable. He supposed that was why she had been able to hold his attention for so long—and it seemed bloody long, the longest he'd ever been interested in any woman he hadn't bedded.

She was not even his usual type with that dark brown hair she always tied back into a loose knot, as though she put little effort into the creation. Even her lopsided smile, made complete by her catlike eyes, was a far cry from his usual sort. He preferred blondes. The color of their eyes never mattered, but Josephine's eyes reminded him of the tropical rain forest, so dark and expressive that his gut clenched every time she looked at him. They always seemed to sparkle with mischief and secrets. He'd yet to see the warmth leave them, even when she gazed upon someone she did not much care for—like him. If anything they became more heated, but never cold.

With the shake of his head, he started to climb the ranked vines

leading up to her balcony, just like Romeo for his Juliet. The irony did not escape him. With a scowl, he continued his way up the vines.

“What the hell are you doing?” An amused voice sounded behind him, causing Damien to falter. He turned his head to glare at the man who appeared on the ground below him, arms crossed over his chest. Matthew Langdon, the esteemed Earl of Grey, stood with an amused expression on his face as he regarded Damien’s efforts.

“What are you doing here?”

“Well, let me see,” Grey’s amused drawl drifted up to Damien. “I happened to be on my way to call on you when I spied you leaving and decided to follow. See what you are up to, if you will.”

“I’m not up to anything.”

“So I see.”

Grey’s craned head said otherwise. It occurred to Damien how he must look, plastered to the side of the house. “Mind your own business.”

“I’m not certain I should, as you are attempting to break into a lady’s bedchambers.”

Damien’s eyes narrowed on the man standing beneath him. “How do you know it’s a lady’s chambers?”

“I don’t. I only assumed as much since you are attempting to climb into it.”

“Why do you believe me up to something in the first place?”

“I would like to think myself smarter than that, since you and Westfield have been up to something ever since I met my wife, and you’ve avoided me for weeks.”

“You and your wife have been occupied of late.”

“I’m not now.”

Damien shifted his position up against the wall, uncomfortable. “Were you aware of their latest project?”

Grey stiffened at the news. “No.”

“Cartwright did not take lightly the disappearance of his wife.”

“Cartwright’s wife was their project?” Grey asked incredulous. “What were they thinking?”

Pleased to see the glint of fury enter Grey’s eyes he shrugged. “They weren’t.”

“Was my wife involved?”

“Do not know, old chap, only know Lady Josephine and her band of dead men were behind it. Hardly matters if Cartwright figures it out.”

Grey gave a curt nod in understanding, his complexion white and hard as granite.

“Does Westfield know?”

Damien’s brow lifted in amazement. The man hid behind pillars

and shrubberies.

“And none of you thought to inform me?” Grey snapped, his voice steel.

“Tread carefully, my friend. I’m not your errand boy and if your wife had been involved I suggest you take it up with her and not out on me,” Damien said, his voice every bit as steely as Grey’s.

“My apologies, I shall leave you to your...” Grey hesitated, “doings. My wife and I have some matters to discuss.”

Damien watched Grey disappear before he turned his attention back to his task of climbing his way up the vines to the balcony.

Jo sat on her bed waiting for all the sounds in the house to fade into the darkness of the night—just as she was about to do. She still hadn’t thought much of where she would go. Belle seemed like the obvious choice. She wished she had another option, one where she did not put the lives around her in danger. Hence the reason she could never stay with Evelyn and Grey. To retire to the country remained a possibility but leaving now may cause suspicion to rise. No, she would go to Belle and together they would figure out what to do.

A sudden noise on the balcony compelled Jo to sit up straighter, her ears straining to hear. A thief? Or Cartwright’s men? She rose to her feet with caution, careful to remain silent while she glanced around the room for something to protect herself with. She snatched up a letter opener from her writing desk and tip toed to the balcony doors. She had an advantage over the intruder, but only for precious moments. She cursed the unlocked doors. But never had there been any cause to lock them. If she could just reach them before whoever it was entered she could alert her brother.

She reached for the lock at the same time the doors flew open, a gush of wind entering along with a man. Jo’s blood turned cold. She was spared no time before he snatched the letter opener from her hand, at once predicting her intentions before she even thought to react.

“Expecting someone else?”

Jo stared up at the dark face of Damien and blinked, certain he would disappear once she opened her eyes. When he still stood before her, Jo scowled. Why had he broken into her bedroom? His question, however, set off alarm bells. “Well, it would seem that way, wouldn’t it?”

“Cartwright, I suppose?”

His statement brought her up short. “You know? How did you find out?”

“I happened to pass by Derek Shaw’s residence and may have overheard your conversation with your good friend, James Shaw. You

really should be more careful.”

He shut the balcony doors, the chill leaving the room with the shut of the door.

“Were you spying on me?”

He ignored her question and countered, “Is it true?”

His close proximity to her made it difficult to breathe and her voice sounded hoarse when she croaked, “Yes.”

“No explanation?”

“It matters little now. I planned to tell you everything anyway.”

“Why, what’s happened?”

Jo shivered at the concern in his voice. Then his eyes drifted to her traveling cloak before it flicked to her suitcase beside the bed. “What happened, Josephine? Why are you leaving?”

Was it her imagination or did he sound panicked? She glanced at the suitcase on the floor and heaved a heavy sigh. “Our mistakes were brought to our attention today. It’s only a matter of time before Cartwright figures it out, if he hasn’t already.”

“So you’re leaving.”

Her head snapped back. “No, of course not,” she motioned to the suitcase, “my brother and I had a fight and I refuse to stay under his roof any longer.”

“How does your brother feel about that?”

Jo shrugged. “He will be informed if we cannot come up with a plan to manage Cartwright.” She slumped down onto the bed, her head lowering to rest in her hands. “We had the perfect plan. How did it come to this?”

He sat down beside her and Jo almost leaned into his warmth. With a gentle touch he lifted her chin. His eyes held her spellbound. They seemed to speak volumes. Of what exactly, she could not be sure. Where was his fury? His disdain? In fact, she only saw concern.

“Tell me more about how Cartwright will learn the truth.”

“Apparently with an artist who can sketch faces by way of explanation.”

“Bloody hell.”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Who participated in it with you, other than Shaw?”

Jo looked away, as if not looking at him would make it easier to admit, but he deserved to know the truth. “Well, Belle of course. Belle’s cousins—”

“You included those little witches?” Damien interrupted with disbelief.

Jo gave him a look, but nodded. “They were in charge of creating a distraction.”

“So they were the ones that set the building on fire?”

"Yes. Well, no. I mean that that was an accident," Jo hurried to say.

"Anyone else involved?"

"Only one."

"I'm all agog."

"Craven."

Jo watched Damien's cheeks redden and his face contort into rage. She stilled, waiting for his outburst, but it never came. Instead he struggled to rein in his temper, or at least Jo thought he did. Too late she recalled she desired one more kiss, which she would not receive in the wake of her blunder. How regretful she hadn't kissed him when she'd realized it was he who stood in her room and not some burglar.

"Nothing happened," Jo felt compelled to say.

"Why did you not ask me?"

Jo stood, nervous all of a sudden. "Can you really ask me that? You are so determined to stop me from getting into trouble."

"With good cause," Damien snapped.

"Perhaps, but this is what I choose to do with my life. I help people. It's my purpose."

He inhaled deeply and stared at her with wonder. "Damn it, you take the very heart of me. I envy you that trait."

"You do?" Jo asked confused.

He looked away. "You have found your purpose and you refuse to let anyone get in your way or take it away from you. It's an admirable trait. But you put your life in danger and as a gentleman it goes against my nature to allow such a thing."

"Because a lady is not supposed to have any purpose beyond securing a suitable match and bearing children?"

He lifted his hands in surrender. "I did not mean to offend you, Josephine. I am only attempting to understand your reasoning."

"What are you doing anyhow, breaking into my room in the dead of night?"

"First, tell me what does Craven say about this turn of events with Cartwright?" Damien asked.

"I do not know. James went to call on him but I haven't heard anything yet."

"What is your plan here, Jo?"

She smiled at his use of her nickname. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"You have a madman on your tail, you're leaving the safety of your home, not to say the protection of your brother and you have me in your bedroom."

Jo's breath caught in her throat.

"I trust that Derek will come up with a plan."

“Such trust. So you believe he will swoop in and save the day?”

“Hardly, but he never fails.”

“I have my doubts, however, if only you would trust me as much as you trust them...”

“Why aren’t you mad?” Jo asked, deciding she had enough of his confusing statements.

He seemed surprised at her question. “I am mad,” he began slowly. “But my anger is not directed at you. Saints know it should be, you bring out the worst in me and at the same time you lure out the best in me.”

Jo stared at him dumbly. Had her hardened rake, the Marquis of St. Aldwyn, truly just confessed something from his heart? Her smile softened and her heart roared. Hope bloomed. Damien, Jo suspected, was not as hardened as he would have the rest of the world believe.

“I am sorry that I lied to you,” she whispered on a breathless voice, “I never meant for Craven to be part of it, but he volunteered after he somehow learned of our activities.”

He leaned into her until his lips caressed her ear. “I do not enjoy seeing you with him.”

A shiver ran down her spine. “Don’t tell me you are jealous, Damien,” Jo teased. It seemed impossible.

Damien gave her a wicked smile. “Don’t be absurd, jealousy would imply that I care.”

Jo leaned in, inhaling his scent. “And you do not. Care, that is.”

“What about you, Josephine? Do you care?” His voice was but a hoarse whisper in her ear, his mouth softly sliding over her skin.

Heat pooled in her body at their proximity. “What do you want, Damien?”

“You know what I want. What do you want?”

Overcome with uncertainty, Jo backed away from his advances until she came up against the wall. Yes, she knew all too well where this would lead if she continued on this path. It was a heady feeling knowing how much the notorious Marquis of St. Aldwyn wanted her. She would never resist him, had desired him too long. The force of her desire shook her.

Golden eyes waited patiently for her answer. The expectation and vulnerability she saw there caused a groan of acceptance to escape her lips. Her surroundings faded until nothing else existed except Damien. This was their moment, one where she would allow herself to have him and pretend that he was hers until time stretched into infinity.

“You. I want you.”

Chapter 14

He closed the space between them in two strides and enveloped her in his arms, his eyes boring down on her.

“Are you certain?”

Jo stared at him, her lips parted and her breathing becoming rapid. Excitement lurked in his eyes, but she saw something else there too, something she recognized as her own.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I am certain.”

It was all the encouragement he needed, his lips came crashing down on hers in a brutal, desperate kiss. Jo clung to him as his lips molded over hers, his tongue coaxing her lips to part. Her body trembled against his as his tongue invaded her mouth, his grip on her waist tightening. As he deepened the kiss, Jo groaned when the hard ridge of his member pressed into her. A gasp escaped her at the sensation.

An urgency resided in their kiss that hadn’t been there before, as if their very lives depended on their bodies touching. Before long he eased away from her and Jo made a low sound in the back of her throat, reluctant to end the moment. No longer haunted by desire but by urgent need.

“Josephine.”

Jo’s knees almost gave way at the suggestive note in his voice. She stared dazed into his eyes, excited and wary at the same time.

“Damien.”

“I have never wanted anyone the way I want you,” he confessed in a ragged whisper.

“Why did you climb up my balcony?”

“I wanted the truth.”

Jo’s lips quirked. “You are not so different from me.”

He pulled her against his chest. “Is that so?”

“You could have called on me, yet you chose to risk injury to climb to my bedroom.”

His rich chuckle warmed her ears. “Perhaps that is why we are so drawn to one another.”

“You believe I am drawn to you?” There was a teasing note in her voice.

“Your silly denials aside, you’ve been chasing me since we met.”

“I have not!” Jo laughed. “Ladies do not chase gentlemen.”

She bit her lower lip, her eyes melting into his. She recognized the desire, the challenge there. Their playful banter was only a distraction. He waited for her to make her final decision. Triumph also glinted in his eyes, as if he had won some long-fought battle. Jo

realized then that she would not have to explain anything to this man. He already knew what she had been desperately trying to hide from him all along. Her desire for him.

There would be no going back after tonight, no more innocent Josephine. She smiled, taking a step closer to Damien, bringing her body up against his. She heard his sharp intake of breath and her smile widened.

Fear had always held her back. Fear of losing her heart, but she feared it no longer. Whatever they shared, they shared it together.

She was tired of holding back when she wanted to let go. Now, as he stood and searched her face intently, as if he gazed into the deepest and darkest depths of her soul, she let go.

“Kiss me.”

His smile twisted into a predatory and wicked curl, his eyes glinting with wanton delight. This time when his lips met hers, it was a gentle caress, filled with delicious promise and sinful pleasure. Her senses came alive when he backed her against the wall, one arm closing around her petite waist, crushing her against him while his other hand ran down the length of her body. Still his lips remained gentle. He tasted of old spice and licorice. She let out a small murmur that was lost in his mouth when he deepened the kiss, a groan of his own escaping when she laid her hands on his chest, moving them upward until they were wrapped around his neck. The innocent gesture appeared to be his undoing and he picked her up and carried her to the bed, his lips never leaving hers.

“You are so damn beautiful,” he murmured against her skin, his teeth scraping the lobe of her ear.

Jo moaned.

“Is your brother here?”

She opened her eyes to find him staring at her in question. “He’s asleep, I hope. Why?”

His hand moved over the length of her body to demonstrate. “I want to take my time. I want to kiss every inch of your body. I want to commit every feel of your touch, every moment of this night to memory, so that I may never forget your first time.”

Her breath quickened. Every word felt like a caress against her most sensitive parts.

He breathed her in and a groan escaped his lips. “How could one woman smell so delicious? Too many damn clothes,” he muttered against her lips. “We need to do something about that.”

“Damien?” Jo whispered, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“Yes, my sweet?”

“If you are talking, your lips aren’t on me.”

“Demanding chit, are you?”

“Oh, yes.”

He leaned back and regarded her with amazement. “You truly are a magnificent creature. I’m going to undress you now.”

She wiggled against him in answer, her smile sinful. His voice had turned harsh with desire and Jo reveled in her feminine wiles. She had to control the urge to start ripping at his clothes like a madwoman. No doubt he would be shocked by her forwardness.

“Please Damien,” she pleaded. If it was his plan to make her expire of desire then he was succeeding. “I need you.”

A wicked smile lit up his face before he dipped his head and took her lips again. A slow gentle kiss, he meant to entice her, while his hands searched for the laces to undo her dress. Jo pulled back from him, her eyes dazed as she murmured softly, “You’re not going to get it done like that.”

“Damn it. Then I have no other choice.”

“I beg your pardon?” Jo asked and gasped when he ripped her dress open, from the bottom right through to the top.

“Bloody hell. Aren’t you supposed to wear a corset or something?” He stared at her naked body in awe, and Jo had to close her eyes in embarrassment.

“I was in a hurry and had no one to help me dress.”

“Lucky me,” he murmured before his lips came down on her breasts. The sensation caused Jo to gasp, her head falling back on the pillow as pleasure coursed through her blood. She curled her hands into his hair when he started to suck more insistently, certain she would die of pleasure.

His mouth lifted from her breast and Jo opened her eyes to find him staring down at her in wonder, yet all she managed to think about was why he still wore his clothes. She wanted to gaze upon the magnificent male body she knew hid behind all that material. “Are you not going to undress?”

“No, not yet,” Damien said and she pouted.

“Why not?”

“Damn it Jo, I wouldn’t hold out long and I want to savor every part of you first.”

“I want to touch you as well.”

She heard his breath hitch but still he said, “All in good time, my sweet.”

When his lips found hers again Jo kissed him back without reservation, her tongue colliding with his in a need that matched his own. He started to remove the remaining material from her body until she lay completely naked, his hands stroking over her exposed flesh.

He slipped his fingers along her breasts in a feather light touch, moving lower, down the curve of her side until his nimble fingers

ventured even lower, finding their treasure.

Jo let out a gasp when one of his fingers slipped into her, nearly bolting off the bed. He held her in place, deepening the kiss until she almost expired from elation, mindless with desire and completely forgetting about his clothed form.

"You're so wet and ready," he whispered before his mouth moved to her breasts once more. When his lips closed over her breast a small cry of pleasure escaped her.

She could scarcely breathe as pleasure overtook her body. His tongue provided so much pleasure with a simple yet exotic action. No wonder women fell from grace. Her hands fisted in his hair before they drifted to his back. He was still clothed, and that wouldn't do. She started to push at the offending material, wanting to feel his skin beneath her touch. Determined to have him as naked as she, she started pushing more eagerly at his jacket until he chuckled.

"Such an eager little wench."

He reared up before her, watching her as he undressed, but Josephine's eyes remained fixed on his fingers as he unbuttoned his jacket, and then his shirt until his entire upper body was exposed to her view. She sucked in a breath at the sight of rippling muscle and perfectly formed anatomy. Her gaze followed his fingers to where they now were unbuttoning his breeches and Josephine waited in anticipation for him to bare himself to her.

"Oh my," she murmured when he finally stood before her naked. Her eyes fixed on his manly parts in utter fascination. While she'd seen images of Greek sculptures, it somehow did not do the real male member justice. What fascinated her most was that it twitched seemingly for no reason.

"Are you quite done staring?" Damien choked out.

"Absolutely not."

Damien groaned and Jo chuckled. "It's just hard to imagine that such a curious thing could be the cause of so much destruction."

He lowered himself over her and once again trailed kisses up her neck. "Oh believe me, sweet. It is the heavenly curves of the female body that causes all the destruction of this world."

Jo didn't answer as he licked her navel. All thoughts fled at the sensations rippling through her body. She arched into his mouth, pressing up against him, satisfied when he growled in pleasure. She wanted more, needed more. His fingers were inside her again, mimicking the motion of this tongue as he continued to torture her with pleasure.

"Come for me, Jo," he growled against her skin.

Jo did not understand what he meant by that but didn't care. Her body had begun to shake as pressure started to build up inside.

“Now,” he growled and the rough timbre of his voice sent her over the edge, causing her body to shatter into a million pleasurable pieces. Her nails dug into his back and she cried out while he murmured sweet words in her ear.

“I can’t wait any longer. I need to be inside you.”

In a haze of pleasure, she became aware of him positioning himself at her entrance just before he plunged deep inside her. Jo, who still clung to him in the throes of passion, sobered when he broke through her barrier in one hard stroke. He caught her cry on his lips and stilled above her, his eyes roaming her face. “I’m sorry, I should have warned you it hurts the first time.”

Jo frowned as she wiggled her lower body. “It’s not that bad. It feels quite pleasant now.”

“Stop moving your pretty bottom, Josephine,” he bit out. “If you keep doing that I won’t be able to stop myself from pounding into your soft flesh as I please.”

Josephine’s lips formed an O at his declaration.

“I don’t mind if you do that.”

With a groan he started to move inside her, slowly at first, watching her intently for any signs that he hurt her. When she started to match his strides he quickened his pace, growling when she grabbed his buttocks and squeezed, arching into him. He pounded into her while she held pace, a cry of rapture escaping her lips.

Jo abandoned herself to the pleasure of Damien’s strokes. Never had she imagined that the act of making love would be so pleasant and earth-shattering.

“You. Are. Mine,” his growl echoed in her ear.

Through a haze of ecstasy the now familiar pressure started to build up inside her again. She arched into him as his own thrusts quickened. In one swift motion, he lifted her hands above her head as he took her breast into his mouth, sucking hard.

In a hoarse voice she shouted his name, pleasure exploding in its wake. She heard him growl her own name as he too found his release, spilling deep inside her, his breath coming out in harsh rasps.

Damien let his head fall into the hollow of her shoulder. He did not want her to witness the alarm he was certain reflected on his face. What had just happened? He shook like some untried lad.

In one quick motion he withdrew and noted with satisfaction the utter contentment on her face.

“Are you hurt?”

She shook her head sleepily and Damien settled in beside her, his breathing still labored.

She glanced at him through one open eye. “Is it always this way?”

“No, it’s certainly a first.”

“What do you mean?”

Damien didn’t look at her as he replied. “This is the first time it has ever been this good for me.”

A soft chuckle reached his ear. “I gather all my experience gained from seducing unsuspecting men paid off.”

Damien nuzzled closer to her. “So long as I am the only unsuspecting man you seduce from now on, I may agree.”

His words were met with the light timbre of a snore and Damien blinked down at her, surprised that she could fall so easily asleep with him still in her bed.

Her earlier words came to mind. Words he never thought she would say. “*You. I want you.*” He’d almost fell to his knees before her and howled.

With careful movements he shifted until her body pressed tightly against his and his arms locked around her until she was firmly nestled at his side. In her sleep she nuzzled closer to him, letting out a satisfied sigh.

A smile stretched across his face. For months she had haunted his dreams, torturing him with desire. He would come awake every morning, breathless and frustrated as hell. But when he saw the trust in her eyes tonight he all but roared in satisfaction.

She trusted him. And that was enough. For now.

It had given him the strength he needed to proceed with care and tamp down his jealous rage. Never in his life had he wanted to lose control as he did at that moment.

He stroked the soft skin of her back and she pressed tighter against him. Even in her sleep she was responsive. Come to think of it, Damien thought with a smirk, this will be the first time he’d shared a bed with a woman the entire night. He hated entanglements. They only served as an annoyance. But then, Josephine wasn’t your ordinary miss.

He stared off into the darkness as his fingers idly stroked her, his thoughts returning to those blasted brothers. It annoyed him that Josephine believed they could do no wrong. He, on the other hand, did not trust them to keep her safe.

He would not allow any harm to come to her, not after tonight, and especially not after he suspected she’d stolen a tiny bit of his heart. One small part. Still, it was enough for him to wish to keep her safe.

The thing of it was, after tonight, after he’d tasted her, there appeared no way he would ever allow her to be involved in another project.

Without him.

For better or worse, he was part of her life now and—devil take it—he wished to run around London kidnapping abused peers with her. His arms tightened around her and he breathed in her scent. He did not wish to lose her now that he finally had her. What that entailed, only time would reveal. But for now she would just have to accept his presence in her life. With that pleasing thought in mind, he closed his eyes and drifted into the first peaceful sleep he'd had in weeks.

Chapter 15

Josephine awoke to the most pleasurable sensation. What a pleasant dream, she mused as she languidly stretched out her body. Then the sensation disappeared and Jo moaned in displeasure. Where had it gone? Ah, there it was again. Her stomach and breasts tingled from the sensation of... of... someone kissing her?

Her eyes flew open and she hoisted herself up on her elbows, staring wide eyed at Damien, who was enjoying himself far too much with her naked body as he kissed his way up to her neck.

"What are you doing?" Jo asked somewhat breathless, her protest dying on her lips at his skillful ministrations.

"I am," kiss, "savoring," kiss, "you," kiss.

"Well stop that," Jo murmured even while exposing her neck to give him more advantage. His hands found the swell of her breast as he settled between her. Now this was a nice way to greet the dawn.

Dawn.

Josephine pulled back, reality acting like a cold bucket of winter water. Her maid would come to wake her soon. She'd never been one to lie about and waste the morning. If there was daylight to be had, she wanted it.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Her heart soared at the endearment. "You need to leave, now."

"Why? Things are just starting to become enjoyable."

Laughter bubbled up inside her chest at his petulant expression. The man was incorrigible. She should be horrified at what had transpired in her room, but she could not muster up the energy. No doubt horror would creep in later, but right now, she wished to enjoy this moment. If not for her maid...

"My maid wakes me at dawn. She will be here any moment!" Jo whispered and pushed at him. He moved off her with reluctance, sparing her a heated glare, one that promised retaliation for her rejection.

"What the devil is wrong with her? You should be sleeping till noon," Damien said disgruntled. Then he shot her a wicked smile and sat up, taking most of the covers with him. Jo scrambled to him and snatched the covers out of his grasp in a yelp.

"I don't like lounging about. I prefer to be busy."

"Of course you do," Damien said his tone dry. "But next time," he leaned in to nuzzle her cheek, "I won't be pushed aside so easily."

Josephine noted his male satisfaction with a frown. There would not be a next time, but best not to inform him of that now. He would never leave then and they'd get caught. It was clear, however, that

Damien presumed there would be a repeat of their glorious night together, which meant he wished to embark on an affair.

A tempting consideration, indeed. Jo would not have the strength to argue if he pressed his suit and tried to change her mind. It would not take much to convince her, and until this mess with Cartwright had been managed, it was best to avoid entanglements, even though last night had been spectacular, magical, and incredible. The most perfect night of her life.

"You need to leave before someone discovers you here and we are forced into an unpleasant situation."

He lifted a thick brow while gathering his clothes from between the sheets. "You mean marriage?"

"Unpleasant business that," Jo confirmed with a firm nod of her head. That earned her a fierce scowl.

"Marriage to me would not be all that unpleasant."

Jo's eyes widened. "Do you wish to marry?"

"Do not be ridiculous," he snapped.

"Then it's settled. Now get dressed!" Jo said and shoved hard. Too hard, for he toppled from the bed and hit the ground in a tangled heap. Jo blinked, her face contorted as laughter burst from her throat. He cursed and rose to his full length, scowling down on her.

"Very well, Josephine, no need to be rude."

"Yes well, I do not wish to be forced into marriage with you."

"I understand," he bit out.

"I cannot believe we did that last night," Jo said on a dreamy note, falling back into the pillows, "And with my brother in the house, no less!"

She smiled at him, surprised at her own light mood. He smiled back at her, his smile predatory.

"I can make you change your mind." The husky note in his voice sent shivers up her spine.

"Oh stop, you need to leave," she said, once again her brilliant smile belying her stern expression.

"Not without a goodbye kiss to tide me over."

"You're incorrigible."

Jo's silly smile did not waver as he leaned over her, his lips pressing down on her in a passionate kiss. He groaned when she responded with the same ferocity, pushing her body up against his. A connection existed between them, one that whenever they got close or even touched one another, the very air seemed to sizzle in response.

He pushed away from her with an expression akin to alarm.

"Bloody hell."

"Well," Jo said unsteadily, "if that's all it took to scare you away, I would've done it sooner."

“Shut that pert little mouth before I decide to stay and teach you a well-deserved lesson.”

Jo clamped her mouth shut, curious how he planned to take his leave, through her door or down her balcony? As if he sensed her amusement he gave her a droll stare, heading for her bedroom door.

“The kitchen door is never locked,” she supplied, watching him through hooded eyes as he opened the door a small measure and listened for any footsteps before he opened it wider.

With a roguish smile he said, “Until next time, milady,” and with a gallant bow he disappeared through the door.

Jo stared at the closed door for several heartbeats before she shrugged into her nightgown and rid any evidence of their passionate night. She stood before the mirror, examining herself with a tilt of her head. She did not look any different than before, neither did she feel physically different. The person who stared back at her still looked the same. But somehow, she had changed.

With a sigh she plopped down on the bed again, gazing at the ceiling, her hands caressing the sheets. A curious warmth spread inside her, and Jo recognized the futility to try and avoid Damien in the future, for he had nestled himself firmly in her heart.

Damien strolled through the streets of London, whistling like a besotted fool. In no particular hurry he enjoyed the brisk morning air. Never had he stayed the night with any woman he’d bedded. What a heady sentiment, this thing between them. Though he had no name for it, he’d be damned if he let it go.

The perfect arrangement.

For one, they both desired each other. Two, they both proved to be passionate beings. Three (and this was probably the most important reason), neither of them held any interest in marriage. Which led to four, they may just be perfect for each other.

They could enjoy each other’s company without the risk of ruining their relationship with commitment. The word gave Damien pause. They may not be committed to one another but they would damn well be monogamous. The image of her in Craven’s arms made him scowl. Jealousy churned in his stomach. He would have a talk with her, to clear out the rules of their engagement.

Well damn, Damien mused as he started to whistle another of his favorite tunes, the word engagement did not cause him to shudder, as it had in the past. A good sign, perhaps?

Thunder boomed in the distance and he picked up his pace. A storm brewed and if the heavy clouds were any indication, rain would soon pour down on his head.

Of course Josephine would be the one woman in his acquaintance

that rose with the dawn. He wanted nothing more than to have continued to show her all the ways he wished to make love to her body.

Last night, after he'd been sated with passion, he even entertained the thought of her snatching his heart and dashing off into the distance. He imagined giving chase but in the end, lost the race. What a fanciful notion for a man satiated in the after-effects of lovemaking. But he could not deny that he cared for her. However, words of love and heart thievery were better left for those equipped with the nerve to suffer through the consequences.

She robbed him of his breath, thus leaving him incapable of uttering words of devotion. Yes, that appeared to be it. Worse, when he kissed her, his heart started to beat with such speed he hadn't been able to breathe. For a moment he believed he would choke or suffocate to death. Did one's heart have an expiry date? Saints, it had certainly felt so.

With a shudder, he guided his reflections to more pressing matters—like how they would manage to get rid of Cartwright. Because short of killing the bastard, there did not appear much anyone could do but flee the country. Yet they were all gentlemen, and while the Shaws may have forgotten it, they did not resort to murder. Other, more devious methods may be applied in this case.

It would require craftiness. Cartwright had put on such a show of his wife's disappearance and Richmond's hatred of him, that if anything happened to him now, all would suspect Richmond and he may suffer the consequences. Damien had no doubt that should Cartwright die, a trail of false evidence would lead straight to the duke.

No, Cartwright needed to simply disappear while his wife reappeared. A sudden thought occurred to him. And why not? With everything else going on and everyone else doing bizarre things, his suggestion may rank first on the less crazy things Josephine and her band of ruffians had done. However, as much as he hated to admit, he would require the assistance of her brethren if they wished to succeed. Because for what he had in mind he needed stealth, level headedness, brute strength, cold calculability and lastly, sheer determination. He pulled a face at forming an alliance with them, but to save Josephine, it had to be done.

Loathed to acknowledge he'd have to find a way to tolerate the men who rooted themselves so firmly in Josephine's life, he made a mental note to badger her for the flaws she once mentioned he possessed. Not a man who shared, and as she was rather selfish in every respect of his life, it might not hurt to at least attempt to become friendly with the men. Who knew, they may even tolerate him

in ten years or so.

Later that day

Damien stood in his study, arms around his chest, and listened to the reactions of the four men he'd invited to take part in his brilliant plan—Westfield, Craven and the Shaw brothers.

"You want to do what?"

"The worst plan I've ever heard."

"Quite genius."

James Shaw shook his thick mane. "You want to stick a man in a crate and ship him to China. We are kindred spirits, you and I."

Damien's smile stretched upward. At least they approved of his plan, whether they liked it or not. He supposed it was only to be expected since they came up with brilliant, flawed and hair brained schemes all the time.

"Why can't the duke force Cartwright to divorce his niece?" Westfield asked.

"We suspect Cartwright acquired knowledge of something Richmond doesn't want to get out," replied Craven.

"But shipping him off to a godforsaken land?" Westfield pressed.

"He is right," James muttered, "killing him will spare us a few coins."

"As much as I want to kill the bastard, brother, Richmond may be suspected if Cartwright is found dead," explained Derek Shaw.

"So we don't leave a body for the runners to find," James returned.

Damien's gaze flicked to the bigger Shaw. "Then you will be nothing more than a common murderer."

"I agree," Derek said with a nod, looking just too damn happy sitting behind Damien's desk.

"And when he returns in a few years' time?" Westfield demanded.

James smirked, his stance lazy as he leaned against the wall next to the hearth where flames crackled. "He won't."

"The plan, I must admit, is perfect," Derek nodded in Damien's direction. "Cartwright will be forced to work his board once discovered, consume food he's not used to and labor with an intensity he would not be used to. My guess is he won't last the voyage, much less a return voyage."

"I do not share your optimism, Shaw, but I like it," Craven murmured in a dry voice.

"Why not send him to Australia?" Westfield asked. "He will be treated like a criminal, but will never return."

Derek shook his head. "The captain is English and may believe

the stories Cartwright spouts. You cannot argue your freedom if you do not speak the language.”

“A China man who trades in England will speak some English,” Westfield pointed out.

“True,” James murmured. “But they’ve no love for us and once on their ship, you may as well be on their land. They won’t give two shits about him or his whining. Cartwright will be lucky if they don’t toss him overboard.”

Damien leaned back against the wall to regard the four men with mild interest while they debated the merits of shipping Cartwright off to China. Derek Shaw, a cocky bastard, was as level headed and analytical as they came. He could see now why Josephine trusted the man. He never once made a move, a decision, without calculating the risk and the outcome. Even the words that left his mouth seemed first to be weighed and decided upon.

His brother on the other hand appeared to be the exact opposite. James Shaw exhibited smooth charm, yet raw strength few men possessed. He struck Damien as the more impulsive of the two brothers, and a veritable risk-taker.

Craven was the most unpredictable of the bunch. Cold calculation glinted in his eyes and made it impossible to predict his actions. He would have calculated any advantage that concerned him and would never do anything that did not benefit him in some way.

Westfield and Damien themselves possessed stealth and precision. Westfield more doubtful and cautious than most, and Damien, well he did not care about anything except to keep Josephine from harm’s way. Where others would just accept, they would doubt and question.

“Do we know if Cartwright has learned the truth?” Damien heard Craven ask.

“We cannot be certain, but my informants tell me he inspected the building that caught fire and had witnesses detail everything they saw leading up to that moment,” Derek murmured.

“Which leads to discovery,” Damien muttered.

“So the Middletons will be first to be discovered,” James stated, his form straightening even more.

“It seems that way,” Derek confirmed.

“If the Middletons are discovered, Cartwright will deduce who the other participants are, beginning by their cousin, Lady Belle and right over to her friend, Lady Josephine,” Craven said.

The tension in the room was palpable after Craven’s logical deduction, which had stabbed like tiny knives into Damien’s chest. For the second time that day his heart sped up to an alarming pace and the fear of suffocation came over him.

“So the first order of detail is to protect the women and ensure

they remain safe at all times,” Westfield said, his complexion white.

They murmured their agreement.

“Not a difficult task at all,” Damien muttered through his tightened chest.

“They’re only women, how hard could it be?”

Both Damien and Westfield shot Craven a knowing stare, while Derek and James only smiled.

An impossible task.

“You do not know them as well as we do. They thrive on defying the word of men,” Damien said before his eyes narrowed on Craven. “Although you should be aware of this, since these women already made you the source of a wager...one Lady Josephine won.”

Craven scowled at that, his eyes lighting up in realization. “Bloody hell.”

Westfield’s head perked up at the exchange. “What wager? And why did I not know about it?”

Damien shrugged, knowing why his friend appeared annoyed by the news.

“Even I knew about it,” James said, gazing at Westfield, no doubt baiting him on purpose.

“The point remains, while we are protecting them from Cartwright, we will need to keep them out of trouble as well,” Damien said before Westfield throttled James, which by his reddened face, was not far off.

“I’ll talk with Josephine. The women will stay out of trouble and not object,” Derek interjected.

The hair on Damien’s neck rose at Shaw’s declaration. Listen to Derek Shaw will she? Like hell. She did not even listen to him. It started to become all the more apparent he would have to tolerate the Shaws for a long time to come.

“Not to worry,” Damien cut in before James could speak, “I will manage Josephine.”

Four skeptical eyes trained on him and he shrugged. “We’ve come to a sort of understanding.”

Eight brows rose. What possessed him to say such a thing?

“Very well, we must come up with a plan and a timeline,” James suggested. “Cartwright must not suspect anything if we are to succeed.”

Derek shifted forward in his chair. “First order of business is to retrieve a list of every ship expected to dock in England in the next week and we need eyes watching to tell us if one docks and does not appear on the logs.”

Craven glanced over to Derek. “I’ll take care of that. I know someone who owes me a favor.”

Derek gave a curt nod. "Meanwhile we must come up with a way to separate Cartwright from his men. I have a man on the inside, he may be enough but I'm not confident."

"I'll take care of that, dear brother."

Derek nodded once again. "Good. Once we receive the ship details we can meet to discuss the final preparations."

"It's settled then," Westfield said, his relief evident.

Derek snorted. "Not bloody likely. Too many things can happen between now and then, too many loose ends." The last was directed to James.

"I see you haven't forgiven me yet," James drawled, not intimidated by his brother's stare.

"There's nothing to forgive, since as you so aptly put it, you did not need my permission."

James rolled his eyes, his gaze flicking to Damien. "Do you see what I have to put up with?"

Damien may have laughed, if he had forgiven James for including Josephine in such a dangerous project. "I would beat you to a bloody pulp myself, but that would mean I'd have to put up with him," he said with a nod in Derek's direction.

"Should we not inform Grey?" Westfield asked to know one in particular. "After all, Evelyn had been party to a previous adventure."

"He knows, but those two have no shame, frolicking about in public. No one would suspect them of doing anything but each other."

Craven's lip curled. "Caught them in the gardens myself one or two times."

"Oh? And what were you doing in the gardens?" Damien snapped, causing every eye to turn toward him.

Craven's smile turned predatory. "Does it kill you not knowing?"

"You son of a—"

"Now wait just a moment," James interrupted, stepping in between the men. "All of that is in the past now."

"What's in the past?" Westfield asked, also stepping forward. "What's going on and why don't I know *anything*?" he directed to Damien. His eyes then narrowed on James. "And why does he know *everything*?"

"That my friend," Damien said his eyes on James, his voice cold, "is a very good question."

James held up his hands in surrender. "It's not what you think. Look who you're talking to, I am surrounded by women most of the time. One hears things."

Damien would have stomped his foot if it wasn't such a childish gesture. He was feeling childish though, not something a man of thirty years should feel.

Derek stood from behind Damien's desk, shooting his brother a pointed stare. "Well now that our business is settled, we will gather again when all is in place. Try not to kill each other in the meantime."

"What about the protection for the women?" Craven asked.

"Oh, I believe it's safe to assume that we've got that covered," Derek murmured.

Craven and Derek exchanged a look that would have set all the other men's hackles rising if they saw it. As it was, Westfield was too busy glaring at Damien, who was too busy glaring at James. James, however, enjoyed being the recipient of these daggers.

After everyone left, Damien sank into his chair, plopping his feet on the desk, and thought of Josephine and their passionate night. Perhaps he should take a page from Grey's book. Lure her outside into the gardens, where hopefully Craven would catch them and see that Josephine was his. The thought made him smile.

Chapter 16

Josephine sauntered through the ballroom with confidence in one of Madam De La Frey's daring sleeveless gowns, violet satin swirling around her feet as she smiled at the gentlemen whose eye she caught.

Somewhat nervous, her heart fluttered in her chest. She hadn't seen Damien for three whole days and two nights. Not since their passionate encounter in her bedroom. The memory still warmed her cheeks with fire. About two hours after he left her room, she'd made quite the spectacular exit with her luggage in tow, informing her brother (in what she hoped had been a calm voice) that she planned to visit Belle for a week. Thus, she'd been able to avoid Damien, though not for the lack of trying on his part.

He had even gone so far as to send her a note, demanding she attend this affair and threatened to drag her out of Belle's home if she did not. So Josephine decided to attend, even though the memories of him and his wicked kisses consumed her thoughts.

For the last three days, she'd done nothing but remember, and pine, and after she almost snuck out to climb through his bedroom window, she decided it was time to stop. The final conclusion being that in no life of hers, previous or present, would an affair with Damien be smart. It would be pleasurable and intense—of that there was no doubt—but it would also be foolish. For the most part Josephine prided herself on being smart, but the trouble of it was caring enough about it being foolish to say no.

So in a campaign to remind herself of why an affair would be disastrous, she developed a mantra, so to speak, which she repeated on an hourly basis.

Damien is notorious, irresistible, sinful, tempting and entirely off limits. Because he is arrogant, bossy, deceitful, manipulative and domineering.

Jo believed if she began her mantra positive and ended on a more negative note it carried a more lasting and permanent impact. A presumption she was about to put to the test tonight and why she truly agreed to attend this event. Not because he had demanded it, but because she needed to discover whether her mantra worked.

Lord Craven suddenly appeared in front of her, out of nowhere. "Lady Josephine," he murmured on a bow.

"Lord Craven, what a pleasant surprise," she replied, her smile broad. They had formed an unlikely friendship of sorts ever since she won the wager.

"You are breathtaking as usual," he commented, taking her hand in his and placing a kiss on her wrist.

“Thank you. Might I say you look dashing this evening?”

Amusement flared in his eyes as he placed another kiss on her wrist. “I assure you, my lady, dashing is the last thing I am feeling at the moment.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“Only when St. Aldwyn is looking.”

Lyrical laughter escaped her as she stared at him with renewed admiration. “You should stop poking the bear with a stick.”

“I’m having too much fun.” He leaned closer, his brow creasing. “How is Miss Middleton fairing these days? I trust she is well.”

“She’s doing much better though quite put out at not being able to voice her grievances—her throat is still raw from all the smoke.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

He tilted his head so suddenly Jo’s curiosity perked. “Is all well?”

“Do not look, but your cave man is heading our way,” he drawled, his gaze flicking beyond her just as the orchestra started a waltz. “Shall we make him green with jealousy?”

Her face a mask of mischief, Jo replied “As always, the temptation is too great to say no.”

He chuckled and guided her into the dance, his amusement never wavering as he pulled her into his arms. Aware that Damien stared daggers their way, Josephine enjoyed herself.

“What are you smiling about?”

“I am puzzled how no one is paying attention to us, which either means you are not so debauched or my reputation is much more unprincipled than I envisioned,” Jo teased.

“I suspect their attention is on the tension between the Duke and Cartwright these days.”

“No doubt it’s a good thing.”

In a subtle movement he pulled her a touch closer than proper. “This is the part where we make St. Aldwyn envious.”

“That cannot be good for your health?”

He tilted his head back and laughed, which gave Jo the perfect opportunity to study his face in a unguarded moment, an impression forming in her mind. Craven would make someone a good husband. “Why have you never married?”

The question sobered him up and he faltered in his step, causing Jo to trip over his feet.

Jo tilted her head back and laughed when they recovered. “I am merely wondering why you never married. You would make a good husband.”

“Whatever you are plotting, don’t.”

“Whatever do you suspect I am plotting?” she asked innocently.

“The type of plotting that leads to trouble. I have no wish to be at

the end of your match making schemes.”

“You may meet your one true love,” Jo pressed.

“Do not attempt to match for me, my lady. You will find it not only futile, but you may even administrate the ruin of an innocent miss in your attempts.”

“Oh very well, but only if you’d tell me why you’ve never married.”

“I suppose for the same reason why any man my age has not. I haven’t found a woman worth keeping.”

“I suppose one cannot fault you for your reasoning. But you are missing out on a lifetime of bliss.”

“I could say the same about you,” he pointed out.

Valid point. “Which is why I won’t subject you to my match making attempts. I will be horrid at it.” Besides, she had no right to meddle in anyone’s life, with firsthand knowledge of how bothersome it could be. One person in particular, no doubt, planned to meddle as soon as their dance ended.

Damien is notorious, irresistible, sinful, tempting and entirely off limits. Because he is arrogant, bossy, deceitful, manipulative and domineering.

From across the ballroom Damien watched Josephine’s head tilt back and laugh at something Craven had said. What could be so bloody funny coming from him? Worse, she had let Craven kiss her hand, twice. Did she have no thought for her reputation?

A swift glance revealed not a nary soul paid attention to them. Bad enough Josephine conversed with Craven in public, no one seemed to pay them any heed. For years mammas had warned their daughters, one smile in their direction from Craven would ruin them. He was that much of a libertine. How had he managed to pull the wool over society’s eyes?

Rage, swift and fierce, exploded inside him. Was Craven the reason she had avoided him for the past two nights? Was she done with him? The thought left a bitter taste in his mouth. With her avoidance she expressed her hope to bring their liaison to an end. Yet after their night together she’d been happy to wake up next to him. He hadn’t imagined her smiles and sighs of pleasure that morning. If her maid had not been expected, she would have let him make love to her again. Now? Now she steered clear of him.

Well too damn bad. No one avoided the Marquis of St. Aldwyn. He rolled his eyes at his own musings—hell, *most* people tended to avoid him to be honest, but not the women he bedded. More often than not they fell over backwards to keep his attention. Literally.

Confounding wench.

He started to wade his way in her direction when the orchestra commenced the waltz, and stopped short when he saw Craven lead her into the dance. What in the blazes? He was further appalled to find no shocked onlookers. No one took note of what transpired under their snobbish noses.

"You look as though you've swallowed a dead rat. The look suits you, by the by." James Shaw came up beside him, his gaze on Jo as well.

"Sod off. You're ruining my black reputation with your presence."

"That dark?" James chuckled. "Yet, still not as dark as Craven's reputed reputation." The smile never wavered from his face.

"Apparently you and I are the only ones who noticed that," Damien snapped.

"It appears everyone's attention lies elsewhere."

Damien snorted. Craven was the blackest of the black, yet he passed unnoticed. It occurred to Damien then, that out of all of their newfound team, Westfield may be the only one with a sterling reputation. That said a lot about his friend.

Apparently James thought the same. "I've always considered you and Westfield an unlikely pair."

"Is it not the unlikely bonds that make for the strongest of friendships? I have always been drawn to unusual and peculiar people, while Westfield, well he's drawn to the more depraved beings, it seems."

"You sound positively fun."

"I'm as shallow as they come."

James chuckled. "At least you are entertaining."

James no doubt referred to his doomed pursuit. Not to mention things were about to get infinitely entertaining if Josephine did not stop laughing with Craven.

"I have my moments," Damien replied.

"You look as though you are about to do something you should not."

"Perhaps I am."

Just because they'd formed a common alliance did not mean they had to become friends. Although, glancing at James, he seemed not such a bad chap, all things considered. He had risked his own life to save the Middleton chit. That should count for something.

The waltz ended and Damien straightened. It was time for Josephine to explain herself. He would be damned if he allowed her to avoid him any longer. With determined strides and without so much as a by your leave, he waded through the crowd and set course directly for the one woman who could end his misery.

As soon as he reached her side he snatched her by the arm,

confident that if the ton hadn't noticed her blatant flirting with Craven they damn well better not notice him dragging her to a more private setting. He noted her shock with satisfaction as he led her rather forcibly away from the crowd.

"What the devil you doing?" she hissed at him. "Let me go."

Damien stopped to glare at her. "I want to know why you've been avoiding me."

"Fine, meet me in the library in ten minutes for heaven's sake. No need to haul me about like some errant child in front of every gossip in attendance."

Damien's eyes narrowed on her. "If this is some ploy to avoid me again, I suggest you think of what I will do when you're not in the library on the minute."

Josephine glared at him. "I'll be there."

They stared at each other for several heartbeats before he let her go, the promise of retaliation in his eyes if she did not appear in the library on time. Insufferable man. She should put insufferable into her mantra since it appeared to be a dominating trait.

Five minutes later Josephine waited in breathless anticipation for Damien to arrive.

"Damien is notorious, irresistible, sinful, tempting and entirely off limits. Because he is arrogant, bossy, deceitful, manipulative, domineering and insufferable." She repeated her mantra over and over until it felt like her head may explode. It appeared not to affect her in any other way.

The moment he touched her or gazed into her eyes, all thoughts and reasons fled, until only they two remained with the sizzling atmosphere between them. So much for her mantra. She had been so certain it would work, but he broke through every barrier she tried to erect.

How could she pay attention for any danger if all she managed to dwell on was Damien and what he looked like naked? A blush stole across her cheeks. The more time she spent in his presence the more she observed a side to him he rarely showed to anyone.

A whisper of a movement caught her attention and she turned in time to catch sight of Damien slipping into the room. Josephine still did not know what she would say, but as his body stalked toward her in slow seductive movements, she hoped he would not expect her to say anything but perhaps demand that she rid herself of her clothes and...Jo shook her head. Now was not the time for fantasies.

His voice sounded hoarse with desire when he said, "You look ravishing."

Oh botheration. Her mouth watered for a taste of his lips. Afraid

she would stutter when she spoke, she remained silent and watched him from beneath her lashes. Did he intend to seduce her here? Her knees weakened with the idea and she took a step back. Her retreat only caused a wicked grin to cross his features. A predator stalking its prey.

“Why have you avoided me?”

In an attempt to gain control over her body, Josephine squared her shoulders. “You are under the mistaken impression that we are to embark on some grand affair.”

His brow lifted to his hairline. “Am I to assume we are not?”

“Yes.”

“So I’m also to assume you did not enjoy the other evening?”

Josephine swallowed. “It was one night. We cannot continue this madness.”

“And why is it madness?”

She glanced away. “How does an affair between us end?”

“Perhaps, Josephine, you are overthinking it. Why can we not let be what will be?”

Yes.

Jo hadn’t realized she’d spoken aloud until a heartbeat later when she found herself caught up in his arms. His lips came down on hers in passionate kiss. Ah yes, she wanted this. She linked her arms around his neck and shoved her fingers into his hair. She wanted this as much as he did, needed him perhaps more than he needed her.

He backed her against the wall, one arm lifting her until she pressed up against the hard surface by his body. His hand guided her leg to rap around him and she surrendered to the onslaught on her senses. Her head fell back as she exposed her neck to his lips. Cold air burned her skin and after a few tugs her breasts spilled out of her dress.

Josephine made a soft noise when his expert tongue found her bountiful mounds. His growl of satisfaction reverberated inside her. The pressure of his hard form against her increased as he lifted her skirts and unbuttoned his breeches.

Her leg tightened around him to keep her balance and one moment he fumbled with her dress and the next he plunged inside her warm flesh. They both gasped at the wicked sensation of flesh meeting flesh. There was nothing gentle about their love making now, their urgency to be with each other was too great after three days of separation.

Josephine held onto him as he pounded into her. Pressure built inside her until she thought she would burst from an unattainable need. As if sensing it, he quickened his pace, his fingers finding her bud. When she shattered he caught her scream in his mouth causing

him to find his own release and spill his seed deep inside her.

Her head fell to his shoulder as Josephine waited for her heartbeat to slow.

The heavy rasp of his breath caressed her neck. She did not want the moment to pass, but it was only a matter of time before someone would come upon them. With a breath of reluctance he pulled away from her, setting her back on her feet.

“Will you avoid me again?”

Jo heard the plea in his voice, though he would never admit to it. They were both in a bind. Neither of them wanted to quit, but neither did they wish to commit. “I don’t believe I could even if I wanted to.”

He placed a gentle kiss on her lips. “Good. As for embarking on a grand affair, I believe spectacular affair has a better ring to it, do you not think?”

Jo sent a small smile his way. “Spectacular affair it is then.”

As if sensing her inner battle he took her face in his hands, his eyes soft with emotion. “Josephine, I do not know what will happen tomorrow, or the next day, but I do know that what we have, we have right now. We can either embrace it or let it slip through our fingers. I want to embrace it, but only if that is what you also want.”

It had been the right thing to say. “Living in the moment is something I am certainly good at.”

“I am aware of what your living in the moment entails,” he said with a dark scowl. “I want you to remain out of sight until we’ve dealt with Cartwright.”

Jo narrowed her eyes, suspicion crowding her mind. “I’ve already been given my orders about staying out of trouble.”

The fact that he did not seem surprised caused that little bud of suspicion to grow. It would seem the tables have turned. Well, Josephine would have none of that. The men appeared to be up to something which they did not mean to share. Have they formed an alliance?

“We should leave before my brother realizes I’ve disappeared,” she murmured.

“I will follow in five minutes or so.”

Josephine nodded and moved past him, but he halted her retreat with a slight touch on her shoulder.

“I will see you tomorrow?”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “I’ll hold you to that.”

“Then I shall dream of all the things I will do to you next.”

Her breath hitched. “What about all the things I wish to do to you?”

“What do you wish to do to me?”

His husky breath tickled her ear and she gave him her most

seductive look. "I couldn't possibly tell you, I shall have to show you."

"Damn Jo, if you don't leave this very instant I will take you again right now."

Was this his plan? To distract her with seduction? Well, she is not without weapons at her disposal. She shot him a heated look over her shoulder before she slipped thought the door.

His ploy may have worked if she hadn't caught on, but she had no plans to stop him. Her smile had broadened by the time she arrived back at the ball, happy she'd decided to attend tonight. Her mantra be damned.

Chapter 17

“Do you not reckon it strange how the men are acting?” Jo asked Poppy, who hovered next to her in an elegant crimson gown for the first time since her accident. They stood in the Duke of Richmond’s exquisite ballroom, attending his engagement ball to the esteemed Lady Honoria Hammington.

“What do you find strange?” Poppy asked.

Jo nodded in the direction of the men. “I’m not sure, but look at them, loitering about.” Her gaze flitted over James, Derek, Westfield, Craven and lastly (with lusty appreciation) Damien.

“I’m sorry Jo, perhaps my mind is still a bit addled but I do not see what you see.”

“Note how they are dawdling about, yet completely aware of each other. They move in harmony. When one of us shifts, they all shift. Like a beautiful song that chants to the rhythm of our movements.”

Poppy giggled, though her giggle sounded much too raspy for it to be considered a giggle. “If you say it like that it sounds odd, but I do see your point. Perhaps they are only being protective. They are gentlemen, after all.”

Oh, how ingenuous the young generation was, Jo mused. “This is different. They have become allies. This means something has happened, something they do not wish for us to be aware of.”

“They are not friends, then?”

Jo shook her head, distracted by the men’s antics.

“You are right. Something must have happened,” Poppy murmured. “They must be of the opinion we are in real danger.”

“Cartwright,” Jo confirmed.

Poppy seemed confused. “They did not mention anything to you?”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Jo replied in a flat voice. She understood their sentiments, but to leave her in the dark? Unacceptable.

“Insufferable goats,” Jo muttered beneath her breath.

“They could go about it in a more discreet manner. Does it not make you want to dash into the crowd and run? How entertaining would it be to see how they scurried about like squirrels?”

Jo doubted any of the men would ever scurry, but it would be amusing to behold and would also serve them right.

“Would they fall for such theatrics?”

“They are men are they not? Why would a wee woman ever pretend danger when there was none?”

Perhaps Poppy Middleton was not as green as Jo first had claimed. And she had to admit, it would be worth a try. “It must seem

real though. If we stare into the crowd and let our expressions turn to that of horror before we turn tail and run, it may work.”

Poppy’s incredulous gaze flew to Jo’s. “I meant it only as a jest.”

Jo shrugged. “And now I’m not jesting. But like you said, it would serve to be entertaining.”

“Very well, what do we do?”

Jo considered the plan for a moment. “We pretend to detect something in the crowd, and then we pretend to be shocked and horrified. On the count of four, we dash into the crowd. But we must bend low, so that they assume we’ve disappeared.”

Poppy, who had been nodding in enthusiasm, paused, “Where will we go?”

“We head in the direction of the library. It should be easy enough to climb out of a window.”

“Climb out of the window?”

Jo nodded. “For theatrical affect.”

Poppy giggled. “I do like the way your mind works. I sometimes wonder if we will ever act like proper ladies ought to.”

“Saints no, what fun would that be?”

“No fun,” Poppy agreed in a teasing manner.

“I like to imagine we are eccentric instead of the usual bore. There’s nothing wrong with being different.”

“My father would disagree with you,” Poppy murmured.

“Most men would,” Jo said with a downward turn of her mouth. “But that does not mean we should follow in the footsteps of their expectations. We should shape our own path and leave our own footprints.”

“As you have.”

Admiration ran in Poppy’s voice, but Jo took no pleasure in it. While it may be considered to some as admirable, she had to fight for every mile she gained. But given the choice, she would do nothing different.

“Are you ready?” Jo asked. When Poppy nodded, Jo stiffened, her gaze alert, staring off into the crowd. Poppy grabbed her arm in a death grip and they both took a step back, horror now entering their expressions. In the corner of her eye, she noted Damien’s go on guard and Jo had to resist the urge to smile.

Both Poppy and Jo retreated step by step in unison, never once diverting their gazes from the spot their eyes were fixed on.

From the side of Jo’s mouth, she whispered, “When I say now, turn and duck into the crowd. Try to stay as low as possible so no one can spot you as you head for the library.”

Poppy’s horrified gaze never shifted as she spoke without moving her lips, “Everyone will think we are crazy.”

"We are." Jo looked around, as if she searched for one of the men. Her eyes locked with James's alert gaze before they slowly flicked back to the spot.

"Now," she whispered and ducked into the crowd. Side by side, they half sprinted and half ran through a throng of people who gave them curious stares, some even disapproving. Neither of them looked back to see if the men followed as they made their way toward the library, running full speed when they were out of sight.

They burst into the library with no finesse, gasping for breath before they started to giggle.

"Did you see their alarm before we dashed into the crowd?" Poppy exclaimed between panting breaths.

Jo nodded. "I cannot believe they fell for it."

"I wish Holly and Willow were here to see it!"

"Come, we must hurry," Jo urged as she made her way to the window and tried to pry it open. "It's stuck."

Poppy came up beside her and helped push at the window with no avail.

"Bloody good for nothing piece of window," Jo muttered as she tried once more, with all her strength, to open the window, but with no success. Just as well, because at that moment the library doors burst open with such a force it made both girls jump. The window slipped open.

Three anxious men filled the doorway, ready to do some harm. Their eyes scanned the room, and after registering no danger, settled on the two women, who still had their hands on the window.

"What the hell is going on here?" Damien bellowed, garnering him disapproving looks from Derek and James. He ignored them as he stepped further into the room.

"Well?"

Jo, whose mouth had been agape up till then, attempted a charming smile. "We tested a theory."

James groaned while Derek only shook his head in exasperation. It appeared the Shaw brothers understood while Damien on the other hand wasn't so quick on the catching on.

"What do you mean you tested a theory?" he snapped.

"Oh, you know," Poppy volunteered. "Danger, intrigue and secrets. The kind men hide from little girls like us even when it remains in our best interest to be aware of them."

"All this just to draw us out?" Damien asked with widened eyes that reflected his disbelief.

Jo shrugged. "Yes."

"Un-bloody-believable," he said, staring at them as if he had never seen them before. "You took ten years off my life!"

“It was never our intention to scare you,” she paused, “that much. In any case, it was not my idea.” She nodded at Poppy, who gave the men a broad smile.

James shifted on his feet, his eyes on Poppy. “It seems almost losing your life did not returned your senses.”

Poppy tilted her head, but her smile never wavered. “Why Mr. Shaw, I did not see you there.” When his eyes narrowed she continued, “I never thanked you for saving my life. So thank you. I will never forget what you did for me.”

Her apology seemed to ruffle James for he glanced away and grumbled unintelligent words before turning on his heel and leaving them with Damien and Derek.

Derek, on the other hand, displayed a sudden interest in Poppy, even introducing himself. He bowed over her hand. “I do not believe we’ve had the pleasure of an introduction madam, Derek Shaw at your service.”

“Poppy Middleton and pleasure is not the word I would use.”

Jo stifled a laugh at the suspicion in Poppy’s tone. Her amusement, however, did not last long when Damien came to stand before her, his body shifting so it made contact with hers. Jo shivered at his touch.

“So what are you not telling us?” Her voice sounded strained even to her own ears.

Derek did not mince words. “Cartwright knows.”

“What?” Both Jo and Poppy gasped even though they’d expected the answer.

Damien’s hand brushed against Jo’s thigh. “We aren’t certain what he knows, but the evidence he gained would lead him straight to you and your sisters.”

“How?” Poppy asked with a frown.

“For one, of all the barrels in your cart only one held gunpowder—the one that conveniently ignited.” Poppy had lost all color, but Derek spared them nothing. “You left the cart, an oversight I presume. Your father is also brilliant at crafting gun powder, a fact widely known.”

Jo felt her heart sink to her slippers.

“In your defense,” Derek added, “had it been anyone else, it might have been overlooked, but Cartwright is a thorough man and leaves nothing to chance.”

“What happens now?” Jo asked, because if Cartwright decided to come after them, nothing short of death would stop him.

She recalled how calm he’d seemed at the theatre, as if nothing rattled him. Jo felt her own a sense of calm cloak around her. She would not be rattled by this news.

At least now they had something to work toward, something to fight. Doubt, worry and speculation could not be fought.

"Do you have a plan?" she asked, looking at Derek rather at Damien. He would speak frankly.

"Yes."

Well how nice for them. "I take it you are not sharing this plan of yours with us."

"Not this time, Josephine," Derek murmured and Jo fumed.

"I take it this plan is too dangerous?" Both men scowled at the sarcasm dripping from her voice.

"It is best for the men to proceed. If anything goes wrong with our plan, we're done."

Jo scowled at Derek. "No plan is that flawless."

"Our plan is not flawless, you would probably shoot holes in it, but that is why we need you to stay out of harm's way."

Jo snatched her hand back. She wasn't in the mood for Damien's ministrations at the moment. "When is this supposed plan of yours taking place?"

"A few days' time."

Jo tried not to react to that news. He would not even give her the exact date. This was ridiculous. How could they go off on a dangerous mission, where they might die and not share anything with her?

"In the meantime, you must remain out of sight and not draw any attention to yourselves," Derek warned.

"That will be easy enough." Poppy muttered. "It's not like we go about searching for trouble."

"I do not believe that," James interrupted, filling the doorway again. "You women cannot stay out of trouble any more than I can stay out of a—"

"James!" Derek gave him a warning stare.

James shrugged sheepishly. "I was going to say bottle of whisky."

"We can manage to remain out of sight for few days," Jo snapped. "You have this notion that we can't help ourselves. It's utter rot."

Poppy grabbed Jo's arm and pulled her to the door. "We must leave. We've been gone too long." She shot Damien a scathing look and to James she said, "In fact, we will court no trouble if you stay out of our way."

Confusion lit James's brow. "Why?"

"Why do people do things they are told not to do?"

"They are children, no doubt."

"No," she said lightly. "They are grown men."

Josephine did not wait for James's reply and Poppy didn't elaborate as she led them out of the library without so much as a backward glance. Eyes bored into their backs, in all likelihood

contemplating whether or not they should trust them, or whether or not they were up to something again.

In the shadows, a figure moved, his footsteps quietly descending the stairs as he made his way into the darkness of the night. Mr. Cartwright would be so pleased once he delivered the good news. He may even give him a promotion, since he had been the one who'd uncovered who lay behind the disappearance of Lady Cartwright.

The shadow chuckled, a harsh grating sound made cruel by years of puffing cheap cigars. One could learn anything if you became invisible, and who was more invisible than a footman.

They considered themselves smart. Lady Josephine, she'd been the brains of Lady Cartwright's grand escape. He was certain of it. And Cartwright did not care about the involvement of anyone else—he wanted the person responsible for the daring the plan. The person who dared to go against the most powerful man in Britain. And that person was a woman. Mr. Cartwright would be furious that a mere woman almost bested him. No wonder she didn't know any better. Women had no sense and were only good for one thing.

Mr. Cartwright would enjoy Lady Josephine, break her spirit and maybe, just maybe, he would throw what's left of her to him. His lips turned into a snarl. He would enjoy snapping her neck when he was through with her. Footsteps quickened as he hurried to get the news to his employer. The sooner Mr. Cartwright knew about her, the faster he would receive his prize.

Willow stared at Jo in shock. "Cartwright knows?"

Jo nodded, glancing at the rest of the girls. They all sat on Belle's bed in her bedroom, well everyone except Willow. She paced the floor, wearing the carpet thin. Holly's head followed the movements of her sister while the rest of them sat in unmoving. Of course the Middletons hadn't known the true purpose of their distraction and had taken the news well enough. Jo hadn't wanted to inform them but Belle insisted. After all, they did have a right to be informed.

Jo would never admit it, but she was terrified of Damien going off on some mission to deal with Cartwright. What if he got himself killed? Would she be able to live with herself, knowing she was the cause? She could not sit back and watch him put his life in danger. But did she have a choice? The men would never divulge the details of their plan.

"Are you ok?" Belle asked with a slight touch to her hand.

With an absent nod she replied, "I have an awful feeling about this."

"They are strong men who can take care of themselves," Belle

supplied in a soft voice.

Her friend only wished to help, and she was indeed correct. Jo needn't worry about the Damien. The thought of him as a pampered aristocrat, lazily wading through life, had never sat true with Jo. Who was she to judge? Guilt plagued her for her lack of confidence in him.

"What are we going to do?" Holly asked, her eyes wide with... excitement?

Jo stared pointedly at Holly, giving her a stern look. "Nothing. The men will deal with Cartwright while we stay out of their way."

Willow nodded her agreement.

Holly bestowed upon them a miserable look. "You propose we sit idly by while the men have all the fun?"

"Fun? This is not a circus fair," Willow reprimanded her sister. "If what is said about this man is to be believed then we are in pressing need of help."

"That is why we should be included," Poppy cut in. "You are asking us to entrust our lives in the hands of men we do not know."

"We know them," Belle told her cousin. "And may I remind you that Mr. Shaw saved your life."

Jo caught Poppy's shudder, but the girl did not let it go. "So we are to let them put their lives in danger because of our reckless actions?"

"I do not like it any more than you do," Jo muttered.

"I say we put it to a vote," Holly insisted.

"What would be the point?" Jo said with the shake of her head. "We do not even know what the men are planning. If we interfere we may cause more damage than good."

"Jo is right, cousins," Belle said with a nod. "We must trust that in a few days' time, the men will have taken care of it."

"I agree," Willow murmured.

"I feel so useless," Poppy admitted.

"Me too," Holly said.

"Has Evelyn been informed yet?" Belle asked.

"No, but for now, it's for the best. That neither she nor Grey noticed anything is amiss is telling enough of their one-track minds."

"She will not be happy when she learns you've kept this secret from her," Willow observed.

"Neither will her husband," Holly volunteered.

Belle and Jo both shrugged. "They will get over it. No use putting them in danger as well."

"Or ruin their obvious wedded bliss," Belle put in, her smile sly.

Holly turned to Jo, her eyes alight with mischief. "Speaking of wedded bliss, I cannot help notice that you and the Marquis of St. Aldwyn are spending more time together."

Jo choked on air, her eyes wide. "I beg your pardon? We have not."

Holly's lips twitched in a knowing smile. "I must have imagined it then."

"Yes, you must have."

Poppy shook her head. "No, I've noticed it as well. The marquis seems utterly taken with you."

Jo snorted. "He enjoys pestering me and would like nothing more than to ruin any plans that revolve around my charities."

"You mean your *dangerous* projects that entail kidnapping every abused person in Britain," Willow supplied in a dry voice.

Jo cast her a look of disgust.

"I daresay the marquis is quite fond of you, and that may explain his determination to protect you from what he believes to be yourself," Willow continued unperturbed by Jo's annoyance.

"The marquis and I have come to some sort of understanding, working together if you will. But it will never be more than that, I can assure you. Neither of us desires to marry."

The girls' expressions remained skeptical, all except for Belle, who regarded Jo with a soft smile. A wealth of meaning lay behind her twitched lips.

"That still does not change the fact the marquis is in love with you," Holly insisted.

"In love with me? Saints no!" The smile tugging at her lips broke into a grin, then peals of laughter burst from within her, a loud silvery sound. The thought was too ridiculous to contemplate. St. Aldwyn, a notorious rake, in love.

"What is so funny about that?" Willow asked.

"Have you met St. Aldwyn? Callous and hardened scoundrel?"

"Not so callous, I would imagine," Belle murmured in thought. "Reformed rakes make for the best husbands."

"And how would you know?" Jo shot back.

Her friend shrugged, unfazed. "I observe people, you learn a lot about your peers if you pay a little attention." Belle regarded Jo through eyes far too wise. "But what I have observed is irrelevant. You've already made your decision."

She had?

"But before you do make the final one, think of what you may miss out on," Willow interjected. "A forever kind of love. The kind that lights up an entire sky, the kind that no matter how hard the storm gets, it could never wipe out the rays of sunshine you hold in your heart for one another."

Eyes wide and unblinking, Jo regarded Willow in fascination and shock.

“Well, I’ll say,” Holly said, breaking the silence.

“I did not know you were such a romantic,” Poppy chirped.

“She does have a point, however,” Belle murmured.

Love. Marriage. Family? That may be very well, but where did her projects fit in? She could not give up on her accomplishments. But, if she did consider something more with Damien, it would require deep examination of her life and ultimately she would need to dig into her soul to pull out the courage she needed to take the chance.

Jo shook her head at their expectant looks. “Fine, I will consider it.”

“Good, now back to the matters at hand. Cousin, we will need your observant skills if we are to observe the men and the apparent danger,” Poppy said.

“I thought we decided not to get involved,” Willow muttered.

“We aren’t. We’ll just observe. Be prepared for when danger strikes, we could jump in and help.”

“And get ourselves killed,” Willow muttered.

Holly smiled. “We can only hope for such excitement.”

Willow glared at Holly while the rest of them chuckled.

“What?” Holly asked innocently.

Willow threw her hands in the air, exasperated. “Nothing! Nothing I say will change your mind once you’ve decided a course to embark on.”

“Oh stop being so dramatic, Willow,” Poppy said. “No one is going to die. This is one of those stories that end well.”

Willow looked aghast. “You would believe this to be a story? This is not a novel, it’s reality.”

“If you can tell it, it’s a story.” Poppy said, looking at Willow as if she sprouted horns.

Willow turned to Belle and Jo, a look of horror in her eyes. “You would let someone with *that* mental reasoning continue on this course?”

Belle and Jo turned to one another and burst out in laughter. Of course they would allow someone with Poppy’s mental reasoning to continue on her misguided path, but best not tell Willow that. Someone with *her* mental reasoning would never understand the reasoning behind it.

Chapter 18

Jo dragged her feet to her brother's study, her stomach clenching with anxiety. Something had happened. Something awful. Her brother had been enlightened to her recent indiscretion, she was sure of it. How he learned the truth or what it meant for her, she could only guess at, but without a doubt, this confrontation would end in war.

It wasn't in her brother's nature to hold back and it wasn't in hers to remain docile. He would try to intimidate her into submission and she would not allow him. Why must the truth always find a way to step into the light?

Her steps slowed as she neared the slightly ajar door, which would lead to her ruin. Any other time she would march up and burst through with fluid movements, ready for battle. But tonight, something warned to her to take her time, warned her not to not push, and to pick her battle wisely.

To be wise, on the other hand, had never been something she excelled at, especially in a fight with her brother. All rational thoughts flew out the door the moment he raised his voice. Almost like in the presence of Damien, only he never raised his voice. The memory of him gave her hope. No matter how bad this confrontation may get, all of it would be erased when he embraced her in his arms again.

The distinct chime of bells resounded in her head as she neared the door, warning her of danger, and she suppressed the instinct to flee. The only thing that allowed her feet to move forward was the fact she never ran from anything. Sneaked about yes, but run away? Never.

Her hand reached out to push the door open, but paused in the act when she overheard another voice.

"I don't like you any more than you like me."

Jo stilled. *Damien*. What was he doing here? Her mind raced over the possibilities of his presence. Brahm wasn't shouting, so it gave her a dash of hope, until her brother's next words turned her blood to ice.

"Welcome to the family."

The sarcasm in his voice unmistakable, Jo heard a slight shuffle and the distinct sound of two men who shook hands. Bile rose in her throat and tiny prickles of unease rippled down her frame. With shaky fingers she pushed open the door, her eyes landing on her brother with apprehension, before they flicked to Damien, the accusation reflected in there as cold as the blood in her veins. Josephine made no move to enter the room.

Both men stared back at her, both with implacable masks. Yet one did not need to see the tension to know it filled the room. Their blank

expression belied their stiff postures, the slight clench of the jaw, white knuckles fisted at their side. The very air felt murky and thick with emotion.

Her eyes roamed every feature, every curve for even the slightest of hints of what had happened. What had led to his?

Damien, ever the enthusiast, took a step toward her, but something in her expression must have made him change his mind for he stopped, took a step back and regarded her coolly.

“So glad you found the time to join us, Josephine,” her brother said.

Ah, there it was. The tell-tale sign of his frayed temper. With only the slight hitch of his voice, one could barely tell, but Josephine (having spent her entire life learning the labyrinth of her brother’s mind) heard the whisper of distaste in her name.

If there existed any doubt that her brother had learned of her indiscretion, it was washed away with those words. To anyone else he may appear to have received the news of his sister’s ruination in a calm and composed manner, which was why Josephine’s lips twitched. It was only the barest of twitches, but he caught it nonetheless.

The strain around his eyes increased as his face reddened to the familiar shade of purple and his shoulders bunched into knots of tension, sending a vein ticking in his neck. Ah, her dear brother, always a slave to his emotions. Even Damien took note of the not so subtle change in her brother’s demeanor and had to look twice, blinking at the sudden change.

“So it’s true then?” her brother asked in a thin voice.

“For the sake of clarity, is what true?” Jo felt the need to ask. She could not bring herself to believe Damien had informed her brother of their affair. To what purpose? Neither of them wished to marry.

“Did you jump into bed with this bastard?”

Betrayal stung, swift and painful, but with remarkable control Josephine managed to hold onto her emotions. “No brother, I did not jump into bed with him. He climbed up my balcony to seduce me and I, being but a woman with a weak soul, had no defense against such an artful rogue and succumbed.”

“Josephine!” Brahm exploded.

She stomped into the room she slammed the door shut. “Do not *Josephine* me! Am I not old enough to decide my own course of life?”

“How old are you?” Damien cut in, as if her age never occurred to him before now.

She shot him a heated look. “Two and twenty.” To her brother, “How did you find out anyway?”

“I received an unsigned note. Which I might add, I did not believe

until you confirmed it moments ago. What in the blazes compelled you to give this libertine your virtue?"

So Damien had not betrayed her. Relief made her weak in the knees. "Well, for one, I assumed it my life to do with as I chose."

Her brother's glare turned even more heated. "You are correct in that assertion sis, it is your life. But I am your guardian. I own every right over you. And it is my decision that you will be married."

"What? Marry him?" She pointed to Damien. "He will never marry anyone, let alone me. Besides, as I told you before, I do not wish to be bound to any man."

"I will marry you," Damien bit out and Jo gaped at him. Which served only to annoy him more for he snapped, "I will do what's right by you."

"You cannot be serious?" Jo choked out, her gaze reflecting the horror she felt. "Now you develop scruples?"

His jaw clenched.

To her brother she said, "I will not marry that scoundrel!" gesturing to Damien.

"I resent that," Damien bit out, "I know for a fact you prefer me to be a scoundrel."

Jo gasped at his outrageous statement, and then laughed in an odd, mirthless sound, not sounding like herself at all. "Oh I beg your pardon, you are not just a scoundrel. You're rotten to the core."

"Josephine!"

She crossed her arms over her chest, ignoring her brother. "I would imagine anyone who ever crossed paths with him would agree."

"I scarcely think—"

"Yes, your thoughts are scarce and few," she snapped at Damien. Jo knew she acted unforgivably rude, but how could he do this to her? He'd known her reluctance to marry. When his face reddened at her rebuke she continued. "I hope my candor and view of your character has not upset your delicate sensibilities?"

Eyes filled with fire met hers. "This from a woman so free with her attentions."

Jo gasped and traitorous tears welled. Desperate to retaliate, she managed to resist the urge and searched deep within for calm. "You would take my life from me."

His hands fisted at his sides and from the corner of her eye she glimpsed her brother angle his face away. In his own way, offering privacy.

"Have you considered our indiscretions may ruin you?"

"You know very well the notion occurred to me. But then, did it occur to you when you so happily climbed through my bedroom

window? Were you not the one who said we should live for the moment?"

Now, the words and the meaning behind them sounded not at all how one should live. One needed to plan ahead, not charge into matters of the heart with nothing but passion to guide you.

"Not that it matters now. You were aware of my intention from the start. You planned to seduce me all along and now, when we are caught, it is my fault and I should have considered the possibilities? How like you to turn the tables."

"What?" Her brother demanded from Damien.

"I will admit I am largely at fault," he whispered, his voice hoarse with fury. "However, while my meddling may have spurred your rash behavior on, it still doesn't change the fact that you almost got yourself killed and let's not forget the fact that you agreed to embark on an affair."

Her breath caught at his slip, but the traitor only glanced to her brother and said, "I apologize for my actions, I attempted to make things right but your sister refuses to be reasonable. I wash my hands of the little witch."

Jo ignored Damien's insult. She spared a nervous glance to her brother, which revealed he'd caught Damien's remark about almost getting killed. She drew a deep breath. "Why, thank you. You're all heart. However, your apology is unwarranted, as is your presence."

"What do you mean she almost got herself killed?" Her brother's hard gaze flew to her with such a force she flinched. "What have you done now?"

Damien's smile curled when he replied, "Why, her involvement in the disappearance of Cartwright's wife, and now he's out for her blood."

Jo watched in detached horror as Damien slammed the final nail in her coffin; she'd never hated him more than in that moment. Had this been his plan to keep her from trouble? To ensure she remained out of harm's way?

"How dare you do this?" Jo whispered, her eyes lit with loathing.

He straightened his coat. "Your brother has the right to know."

"St. Aldwyn—" Her brother began.

"I have no desire to linger. I know my presence is not welcome."

"No, it's not." Jo's voice was hard with fury.

"I did not do this." To her brother he said, "May I see the note?"

Her brother handed it over without protest and Jo watched Damien's eyes hardened as he read the content.

"Who sent it? And do not dare lie to me. I can see on your face you know who penned the note?"

"It's a woman's penmanship."

Jo snatched the note out of his hand and after carefully studying the content, cursed. Those blasted Middletons. They have ruined everything with their romantic ideals.

Cold, unforgiving eyes bored into her only moments before he strode from the room. The door slammed shut behind him. Finality.

The tears she'd been holding back threatened to break free but she clamped it down when she caught sight of her brother's expression. Not only was he angry and disappointed, but defeat was reflected in those jade colored eyes. No explosion of temper, no shouting or bellowing followed. Only grim defeat. It was so unlike her brother that for a moment worry creased her brow, before she realized his lack of temper may be due to exhaustion.

Guilt and shame slammed into her. "Brahm, I—"

He glanced away, his jaw tight. "Go pack your things, Josephine. You are leaving for Green Rose Cottage in the morning."

Jo gasped. "But I—"

"Explanations are of no interest to me. You've made your choice and now I'm acting upon it. You have done nothing but throw yourself in the path of danger, manipulate me and lie to me. Now there appears to be a dangerous man who wants you dead. You are leaving and that is final."

"I'm sorry Brahm, I should have told you."

"But you did not."

Her shoulders slumped. "I know."

"What happened, Jo? Why are you so determined to throw your life to the wolves?"

She flinched at his question, wanting to cry at the unfairness of it all. Not only had she lost Damien, but it appeared she'd lost her brother as well. Had her quest for a purpose been worth all this loss and pain? Perhaps tomorrow the answer would be clear, but she would obey her brother. "I only wished for a purpose of my own," she whispered.

He lifted the decanter from his desk to pour himself a whiskey. "Well, I hope the purpose you've chosen was worth all this."

"Every moment," Jo whispered, not prepared to say anything else that may unmask her uncertainty. "If you'll excuse me, I shall go pack."

"Did you use precautions?" Her brother's strangled question gave her pause just as she reached the door.

She glanced over her shoulder. "What precautions?"

"Damn."

Her delicate brows drew together when she saw his face, neck and ears redden. "What's wrong?"

"I...Ah...That is...Is there a chance you may be with child?"

Jo blinked, realization dawning. "Oh! I mean no! No."

She heard her brother's sigh of relief and fled the room. Because truth be told, how was she to know whether she carried a child or not? A foul curse left her lips. What happened if they'd created a child? Could she marry him with the knowledge he may never commit? And who would desire to tame such a glorious wild beast? Not she, who loved him for all his wild ways. Just as well she was scheduled to leave London. If she happened to be with child she may even remain away forever. Live a secret life of ruin. Marry a farmer.

Five hours later Damien hurled a chair in his study, watching it fly across the room and shatter against the wall. A loud crack resonated through the room as wood splintered. *Damn them all to everlasting hell.* He slumped into another chair and ran a shaky hand through his hair. For once, just once, he thought to do the right thing, to consider another instead of thinking of himself. And what did he get?

A string of curses erupted from his lips, his eyes roaming for something else to destroy. Smashing his belongings to pieces felt good.

"Woman troubles?"

His head shot up at the sound of Craven's voice and he rose with a sneer. Damnation, he hadn't even heard Craven enter. Where the hell was his butler? Did he have no control over his own damn life anymore?

"What would you know?"

Craven's smile remained thin. "I have thrown my fair share of chairs."

"Doesn't mean it's over a woman," Damien spat out, the words hard to utter.

"No? Are we not damned for them?"

Damien stilled. Dammit, he wasn't that transparent. In any case, it would take a love sick fool to recognize the signs of a love sick fool (which Damien was not). Which still did not change the ultimate fact—he loved that wretched woman to the point of distraction.

"She refuses to marry me," he admitted in a begrudging tone.

Craven raised a brow, clearly surprised Damien chose to confide in him. "You offered then?"

"I may have mentioned it in passing."

Craven just stared at Damien.

"After her brother demanded we marry."

He whistled. "And she still refused?"

"Yes," Damien muttered darkly. "She called me rotten to the core."

He wanted to punch something again. Their entire encounter

echoed off the halls of his mind as he tried to understand where he'd gone wrong. In the library, she'd acted sweet and passionate in his arms and he thought, no revealed, in the knowledge of her affections. Then today she turned and spat all sorts of rude things his way.

Would marriage to him be so abhorrent that she would defy her brother's demands? Of course he was well aware of his depraved existence, but he'd been foolish enough to hope she would take him anyway.

"Perhaps you should have told her that you loved her."

Damien snorted, pouring them some much needed whisky. "She would never have believed me. What are you doing here anyway?" he asked, handing Craven a glass. They were much too similar to like one another, so stopping by for tea and cucumber sandwiches seemed out of place.

"I received a note to meet, yet I appear to have arrived early."

Splendid.

Damien was in no mood for company and now he would receive four. After leaving Josephine to the wrath of her brother, he'd tried to cool his temper by drowning his sorrows with whisky at his club, but that only seemed to needle him more. Now he would be required drink more just get through this bloody meeting.

As if on cue, Westfield and James Shaw entered his study. Both regarded the broken chair with curious eyes before they made themselves comfortable.

"Has my brother not arrived yet?" James asked, taking stock of the room.

Damien cast his eyes heavenward. Anyone could see his majesty had not arrived yet. "Isn't that obvious?"

James shot him a killing glare. "What crawled up your rear end?"

Craven smiled but said nothing and by nature of his character Westfield jumped in to stop an exchange of blows. "Shaw is following up on a lead. He will arrive shortly."

Damien chose not to ask how his friend knew that. If Westfield attended tea parties with the likes of Derek Shaw, he wished not to know of it.

"This better be good," he muttered, annoyed at how easily they commandeered his home.

"No doubt it is."

"What's this lead he's looking into?" Craven asked, stationing his body between James and Damien.

James' demeanor turned hard and he glanced to Westfield, who apparently had all the answers.

"Word has it Cartwright made some rather devious plans. Shaw is meeting his source to discover what these plans entail so we can

intercept him and move forward with ours.”

“There’s a ship in harbor?” Damien asked surprised.

Craven shook his head. “A Japanese ship.”

“Bloody hell.”

They nodded in Damien’s direction. They all knew what that meant. The Japanese rarely ventured far from home, and when they did, it never promised good. While Cartwright may have had a chance at survival with the Chinese, he will have none with the Japanese.

“How much time do we have?” James asked.

Westfield shrugged, but the concern in his eyes never disappeared when he said, “Shaw’s informant said two days, but it’s unclear who Cartwright has his sights on. It could be anyone.”

Damien’s heart plummeted. He’d known the danger, but somehow it had never seemed real, until now. If Cartwright set his sights on Josephine, Damien would sever his head, never mind awarding the Japanese the pleasure.

The silence that followed bore testament to the men’s brooding mood. Everyone seemed to be lost in thought, contemplating the same thing. Who would Cartwright target? All them? Only one of them? Perhaps none of them but someone else? Thankfully, Lady Constance had been collected and remained safely tucked away abroad.

“What did the chair do to deserve such punishment?” Westfield asked, breaking the silence.

Damien shrugged, his gaze flicking to Craven, indicating Craven’s awareness of the matter, but he made no plan to divulge to his longtime friend. Perhaps his actions were childish, but the woman he loved did not want him and his best friend consorted with her confidantes.

A heavy footstep alerted the men to the arrival of the other Shaw, the lines of his face stark and pale when he entered the room. Tension poured from the man like untamed waves.

“My source has been betrayed,” he stated flatly. “Cartwright already made his move.”

The men stared at Derek in shock, horror spreading across their expressions as the possible implications of his statement hit them.

“Who?” Westfield choked out.

Derek clenched his jaw. Hard.

“Who?” Damien said, his voice steel.

“Cartwright snatched Lady Josephine and Lady Belle.”

Derek’s statement echoed through Damien’s study, hollow and empty. The color drained from his face and all the warmth left his body, leaving him cold and empty. No. He’d just departed from her mere hours ago.

“How?” James whispered.

“Both women were taken from their homes, four hours ago. Cartwright informed all his men with the wrong information, all but two of his most trusted men. Apparently he suspected a breach.”

Damien legs weakened. Jo had been taken only an hour after he'd stormed out in a rage. If he remained, fought harder to convince her, but he had let his temper get the better of him instead...Just like his father. Now Jo's life dangled from the hands of a mad man.

Four hours.

Bile rose. He bent over, trying to tamp down his nausea. He focused on Cartwright's face, and what he would do to the man once he found him. Fury took over, causing his muscles to bunch and his eyes to glaze over. Yes, he preferred anger. The nausea retreated and he straightened, his face as hard as stone.

“Where are they?”

“I almost feel sorry for Cartwright,” James muttered beneath his breath.

“I'm rather happy myself that I'm not on the receiving end of that glacial intent,” Derek muttered, then to the whole room he said, “They are being held on a butcher's farm on the outskirts of the city.”

“Your information may be wrong,” Westfield said.

“I knew better than to arrive without the whereabouts of the women,” he replied without hesitation.

“Forgive me if I do not care to trust your word,” Damien said, his guttural voice heavy with hatred.

Derek nodded. “I understand what you may be feeling, but we need to be levelheaded if we wish to retrieve the women without harm. Cartwright will expect us to follow. We may be walking into a trap.”

“I don't give a shi—”

“St. Aldwyn—”

“Don't,” Damien bit out. “She's been gone four hours. They may be...they may be...” He could not manage to finish the words.

“I have a plan, but we must be smart about it,” Derek said, his eyes softening, though his face remained granite.

“Will we need more men?” James asked ask his brother.

“That depends if everyone can keep their heads together.”

“We must leave at once,” Westfield snarled, surprising everyone.

Derek never lost his calm as he replied, “You need to settle down. We will be of no help to the women if we get killed saving them.”

Craven nodded. “St. Aldwyn? Your word you will not do something rash?”

All eyes settled on him.

“What will I do?”

“Do not even think about leaving without us,” Derek warned

Damien, cold eyes clashing with hard ones.

“Both of you,” he said, his eyes flicking between Damien and Westfield. “You both have that look in your eyes.”

Craven stepped forward, stopping beside Derek, eyeing the men skeptically. “What look?”

“That they are both about to do something foolish.”

Craven nodded. “But foolish how?”

“Like they are about to charge into a battlefield with nothing but their wounded souls.”

Craven glanced at James, “Will you make certain the plan’s in place? I believe I’m needed here.”

James nodded, disappearing through the door, leaving four men facing off.

Chapter 19

Darkness greeted Josephine when she opened her eyes. The chill of the room where they kept her sunk into her bones and she shivered. It stunk of rotten carcasses and the distinguishable buzz of flies met her ears. Josephine had no idea where the men had taken her since they'd knocked her unconscious, but if the ghastly smell happened to be any indication, she ought to be terrified.

At least it appeared to be still daylight; some light was afforded to her through the small window overhead. That was something she supposed. She spared the room a fleeting glance. Nothing distinctive about the room caught her attention, except the overwhelming smell of blood and something else that caused nausea to rise.

A chill rippled down the side of her spine. Her guess would be they held her captive in a place used to butcher animals. They meant to butcher her, torture her until nothing remained of her. Panic reared its ugly head. Would they feed her to the pigs once they were done? Or bury her body in a shallow grave?

Jo choked backed a sob. She refused to cry. Strength. Her survival depended on strength, for her friends may not find her in time. Too many places to search existed. How long since she'd been taken? Three hours perhaps? No one would even take note of her disappearance until morning when she failed to depart for Green Rose Cottages as ordered.

Even then, her brother may believe her stubborn and not search for her beyond her friends, who may also believe her stubborn, disobeying her brother's orders.

Damien despised her. In all likelihood he never wished to lay eyes on her again.

By the time anyone suspected something was amiss, it would be too late. No, she must escape, save herself.

Her hand traced the swollen flesh of her eye where the beast of a man had punched her. It throbbed without mercy, but she tried to ignore the pain. If what was believed of Cartwright was true, the pain of her bruised eye would be nothing compared to what would follow. Cartwright delighted in causing pain, maybe even taking his time about it. Jo may be scared out of her wits, but also relieved that he'd snatched her and not one of her friends.

The sound of heavy footsteps caused her breath to catch in her throat and she scrambled to the far corner of the room. The door slammed open and a man entered, pausing only long enough to drop another person inside.

"Here's your little friend. Enjoy each other's company while you

can. When the boss is through with you, there won't be much left."

Jo did not glance at the man's face. Her attention was riveted on the blonde figure who lay sprawled on the ground, unconscious. As soon as the door closed she waited several heartbeats before she clambered on her hands and knees to the still form. Her heart missed several beats when she recognized Belle. Her face beaten far worse than Jo's swollen eye, it was obvious that Belle had fought back.

With an unsteady hand she brushed a bloodied curl out of her friend's face. "Belle?" she whispered in a soothing voice, "Wake up."

Tears openly streamed down her face and blinded her vision. She wiped at her wet cheeks in furious movements. This was all her fault. She should never have included her friends in any of her projects.

"Do not dare cry," Belle's hoarse voice croaked in her ear.

Jo still wiped at her tears, glancing down at Belle, who stared at her through swollen eyes, fury evident.

"Belle," Jo's breath came out in a relieved whoosh.

"How does my face look?"

"Beautiful."

Belle scoffed, propping herself up on her elbows. "It hurts like hell so I know it looks like hell."

"You always had terrible logic."

"We're not dead yet, Jo. The men will find us."

But Jo knew better. It could be hours before anyone realized they were missing, and by then they may be dead.

"I'm not afraid to die; I'm afraid for my friends."

Belle grunted. "Do be more positive. What we lack in height and form, we make up for in spirit and determination."

"Damien and I had an affair," Jo blurted, feeling the need to at least tell her friend that much. "My brother discovered the truth and demanded we marry. I refused, of course. He wished to do the right thing and I called him rotten to the core."

"How did your brother learn the truth?"

Jo gave her a pointed stare and Belle nodded. "My cousins."

"I'm sorry I never told you."

Belle's lip twitched and she flinched in pain. "I knew about the affair."

Jo's eyes flew to hers. "You did?"

"Of course. You may fault my logic, but I still have eyes." She suddenly chuckled. "So you called him rotten. That must have been something."

Jo managed a small smile. "Evelyn shall kill us when she learns of our deception."

"Hopefully we'll be dead by then."

Jo did laugh then, the sounds echoing off the hollow walls of the

room. She huddled closer to Belle, noting when Belle flinched. "How bad did they beat you?"

Belle shrugged. "I may have to forgo corsets for a while. They cracked some of my ribs, I imagine."

Jo cursed, anger replacing fear for the first time since she'd gained consciousness. So the torture had already begun? Well, she would not give Cartwright the pleasure of allowing any weakness to show and judging by the stubborn look on her friend's face, neither did Belle. She understood now why Belle jested to keep the mood light, even in the face of death. Cartwright expected them to cower and cry. He would not know what to do with laughter and defiance.

"Why did you refuse St. Aldwyn? You obviously love him."

Jo sighed. Even now in the face of her imminent doom, she still wasn't ready to admit that she loved him aloud.

"You possess a reluctant heart," Belle murmured. "Nothing wrong with that. There is risk to open your heart to pain, but perhaps it may be more painful to take no risk at all."

Jo looked away. They were the same age, yet Belle was far wiser than her. "Why did you decide against marriage?" Jo asked instead. They'd all shared the same reluctance to wed until Evelyn had tied the knot.

"I've never met a man that I believed worthy of all my baggage."

Jo blinked. Not the deep heartfelt response she'd been expecting, she promptly burst out in laughter. How like Belle to place it all in perspective. Belle joined in on the laughter, and for a brief moment, happiness bloomed in her heart, glad to have her friend by her side.

Their reprieve, however, was short lived when they heard the sound of an eerie whistle, followed by slow, deliberate footsteps. The tone caused the hair on Jo's neck to rise.

Cartwright.

"No matter what happens," Belle whispered, gripping Jo's hand, the first sign of distress Jo had seen since her friend opened her eyes. "We will stay strong."

The door swung open with a whoosh and a tall man entered. The beautiful angel Jo recognized from the theatre. His cold gaze drifted over them, a hawk inspecting its prey. When he noted the bruises on their faces his implacable mask transformed into a fierce scowl.

His displeasure made it clear he did not like the fact that he had not been the one who inflicted pain upon them. Jo, once again startled by his elegance, gripped Belle's hand. It may be naïve to presume beauty did not equal evil, but how could such an attractive being be so cruel?

"If I hear laughter," he said, a snarl forming on his lips. "I must be doing something wrong."

The cool hatred in his voice caused both women to flinch. He sounded so calm and sure of himself. It was frightening. Jo would never give him the satisfaction of their fear, however, so she plastered a smile on her face. "You have only figured that out now?"

When his icy gaze rested on her Jo had to force herself not to cringe under those merciless eyes, wondering how they'd become so empty.

"Lady Josephine," he said, her name rolling over his tongue like some ancient curse. "I've heard so much about you these past days. It seems as though we've been acquainted forever. Alas, you've been nothing but a thorn in my side, one I intend to pluck out."

"I assure you, the feeling is mutual."

"Such spirit," he said delighted. "I will enjoy breaking it."

Josephine scoffed. "My spirit is the one thing you'll never break."

Cartwright did not possess an evil smile or even a cruel one. If it had been but so, Jo might not have been so terrified. Instead his smile was euphoric, like she'd just given a small boy a big Christmas present.

"I'm going to enjoy making you scream."

The men arrived at the abandoned butcher's farm two hours later. Damien cursed at the time they'd wasted, deliberating on a plan and knocking out Warton, twice. When it became apparent that informing Lady Josephine's brother had been a mistake and after the second knock out, they locked him in the pantry. The man refused to listen to logic or calm his raging emotions. How Jo managed that grizzily astounded Damien. It also attested to her strength, or at least that was what he'd told himself for the past two hours.

Six hours.

He should've told her he loved her. Now, in the midst of regret, he prayed to the heavens she'd been able to hold onto that strength.

Derek Shaw motioned the men forward. They had the building surrounded, moving forward from every side. It remained unclear how many men Cartwright stationed inside, but on the outside it appeared too silent. Eerily so. He also understood now why Jo allowed Derek to take the lead on their projects. By all appearances, the Shaws were government men, trained to slip in and out of places without detection. Spies, perhaps?

It afforded him some comfort, but not much. He glimpsed Craven motion with his hands in James's direction as they came up to the side of the structure. A loud crack drew his attention to his right, just in time to witness a body falling before James's feet, the man's broken neck a telling tale. Damien suppressed a shudder as he stepped over the dead man, following James inside. He spared only the slightest of

glances to Derek, whose face displayed no sign of remorse.

The building, Damien noted, was bigger than he'd anticipated. His heart sank when they searched for a sign of Jo's presence but found none. Not even a sound could be heard over the rapid beating of his heart. Was she still alive? Were they even at the right place?

Westfield and Craven entered through another door and shook their heads. Dread crept up his spine at the thought of the women alone somewhere, with no hope of being rescued. Fear choked him. He could not bear her being hurt. What sense did his life make if she was not there to spar with? He would never forgive himself if anything happened to her.

"We'll get her back," Craven said, coming up behind him.

Damien nodded, not trusting his voice. He would be damned if he started to howl in front of grown men.

"Would you two stop gossiping like two girls and focus your energy on finding the women?" Westfield snapped.

Damien attempted a smile at his friend's disgruntled tone, but his spirits plummeted when a piercing scream filled the air. Not a scream of terror, but one of profound pain.

His chest hurt. He strained to breathe.

Josephine.

"No," he whispered.

Damien did not think, only ran toward the sound full speed, uncaring of any danger.

Jo had refused to scream until pain radiated through her body, causing her vision to dim. They'd tied her down on a table, like a beast, restraining her arms and legs. Up until then, she had not given Cartwright the pleasure of her screams, but she found it hard not to react to the knife that sliced into her body.

Sweat beaded on her forehead and her gaze flitted to Belle, where they'd shackled her in chains, suspending from the roof, blood dripping from her mouth. Her wrists were scratched open and had to hurt, but still she glared at Cartwright, the only sound uttered from her lips were curses. So this was to be their end, butchered in a slaughter house.

Her tired eyes flicked back to Cartwright. He must have had hopes and dreams once. How had he become so cold and empty? Was one born with the desire to inflict pain?

"What happened to you?" Her voice came out as a raspy whisper. The knife stopped, hovering inches above her skin, and for a moment, so did the pain.

Blue eyes stared at her dispassionately. "Excuse me?" he asked softly, deadly. It was obvious the question annoyed him, irritated by

the fact she could ask him such a thing in the middle of his torture session.

“What happened to you to make you like this?”

His lips twisted into a snarl, and he seemed more beast than man. “Not everyone grows up in mansions and castles. Some, like me, have to claw their way up from the gutter. It tends to wipe away fancy notions and lofty ideals.” The knife pierced her skin with sudden force, and Jo almost screamed at the pain, but managed to only whimper.

“Not everyone. I see people rise above their circumstances every day. I help people,” she choked out.

“You truly believe that?”

“Yes.”

Malevolent laughter echoed through the room. “You and I are not so different from one another.”

“I’m nothing like you. You enjoy torturing people and inflicting pain on others.”

“And you don’t?” he asked with an evil smile. “You torture people Lady Josephine, you just hide behind your methods.”

“I do not know what you mean,” Jo whispered in confusion, pain making her dizzy.

“Hope, Lady Josephine. I’m talking about hope. You torture people with hope, which I might add, is the worst kind of torture. Do you truly believe you help them? You retreat back to your big mansion, eat an eight course meal and live in luxury, safely tucked away in your Mayfair bed. Those people return to their meager belongings and rotten food in their rat-infested homes, believing in a future that will never come to pass.” He leaned closer to her, until his mouth was at her ear, “That is torture Lady Josephine. It causes pain. It might be a different kind and even a different pain than what I inflict, but it still is what it is.”

“Not true.”

Cartwright straightened. “Oh come now Lady Josephine, of course it is. Just because you decide to call a rose a flower, does not mean it won’t have thorns. You see, my lady, you and I are much more alike than you think.”

“You’re an evil bastard, Cartwright,” Belle spat. “You do not know the first thing about what we do.”

“Ah, Lady Belle, I know far more than you would imagine. You are, however, still going to die, painfully, at my hands and I’m going to enjoy every moment of it.”

“Westfield will come for us.”

“Westfield?” Cartwright said, laughing. “Westfield doesn’t know the difference between left and right, do you honestly believe he can

outsmart me?"

"It doesn't matter," Jo interrupted. "I'm not afraid to die and you will never break my spirit."

He moved so fast she had no time to perceive his intent before a fiery heat ripped through her hand, as he drove his knife straight through her palm. A scream tore through her throat as her whole body trembled in agony. Tears stained her cheeks as the pain worsened with intolerable force. White specks danced before her eyes.

A whisper of a familiar voice tugged at her, her name on his lips. Damien. Regret filled her heart as she thought about leaving him behind. Here, in peace on her cloud of darkness, Jo could admit to herself that she loved him. She loved him more than she'd ever loved anything in her life. What sweet torture it would be when she looked down from her dark cloud, to find that he loved her back.

From a distance she heard shouts and recognized Belle's voice, cursing obscenities at Cartwright, sobs racking her body. Jo tried to reassure her, but her mouth did not seem to move. Darkness beckoned. She floated upward and upward, then a loud crash and then other voices as well, but Jo drifted on a cloud of blackness, happy to be away from the beautiful man with the cold eyes.

Curses sounded behind Damien, followed by the plodding of footsteps as they rushed after him. Westfield came in beside him, his face as pale as Damien's, urgency riding them hard.

Four big men filled the hallway, ready to stop their rescue.

"Oh good, company. I've been itching for a fight," James said with in an ominous tone.

The men hesitated for a slight moment, but it was enough for Damien to charge passed them, leaving them for the others.

Another scream tore through the halls and bile rose at the image of what he might find. Damien steeled himself for the worst. He heard the voice of Lady Belle, shouting obscenities at Cartwright. He must be near.

With his resolve steeled he burst through the door, the sight that greeted him stealing his strength and his knees hit the floor with a thud. Westfield burst in moments later and an audible gasp tore from his throat. Derek Shaw also appeared, a pistol aimed straight at Cartwright's heart. Only then did Damien realize he'd sunken to the floor. The pistol fired, hitting Cartwright in the shoulder.

Westfield grabbed Damien by the jacket, hauling him up and without a word pushed him in the direction of Jo, who lay lifeless on a table, strapped down. The monster had strapped her down. He stumbled in her direction, ignoring the sobs of Lady Belle, as he dragged his feet over to Jo, tears welling at the sight of her bruised

and battered body.

With shaky fingers Damien trailed Josephine's cheek, her skin still wet where his finger traced. He was too late. Cartwright had tortured her. A bloody knife protruded from her palm. Tears flowed freely now and he wiped at the wetness. He'd lost her.

"I'm so sorry, Jo," he murmured in a hoarse voice against her lifeless lips.

"She's not dead," a voice croaked. "She's not dead."

But Damien refused to listen, his attention focused on the peaceful expression on Jo's face. James, who'd been frozen at the door until Belle's words penetrated, came up beside him, hitting Damien over the head with a resounding slap.

"She's not dead, you dolt," he snapped and flinched at the sight of the knife still embedded in the palm of her hand.

"You need to remove that," he said to Damien, slapping him again.

"Hit me again and I will beat you to a pulp." But still Damien felt for the throb of a pulse, not quite believing the man.

The gentle thud of her heart beat caused him to straighten, his eyes alive with relief and fire. Her pulse was faint, but there.

"Good. You're back. We need to remove that knife."

Damien balked at the sight, the image now somehow more unbearable.

"I'll do it."

All eyes turned to Craven, his voice hard and certain. James nodded and stepped aside, leaving Damien at Jo's side. Westfield had successfully gotten Lady Belle free and was tending to her wounds in silence. Of Cartwright there was no sight.

"St. Aldwyn?"

With a curt nod Damien stepped aside, watching as Craven's hand gripped the hilt of the knife in a tight grip. In one smooth motion and without warning he ripped it out, causing Jo to whimper in pain.

Damien's eyes never left her as he gathered her into his arms while Craven tore a piece of his shirt to wrap her wound.

"She needs a doctor."

Damien nodded. "I'll take her home, you take care of the monster."

"Oh don't you worry," Derek said, "he will wish he was dead once we're through with him."

With a nod Damien carried Jo out of the room, Westfield following on his heels with Belle. Josephine lived. Now all that remained was convince her he would be the best husband in Britain and would never fail her again. He did not wish to continue on his journey without her by his side.

Even if she hated him, he did not care. His arms tightening around her, he dropped his head against hers. "I love you, Josephine," he whispered in her hair and placed a small kiss on the tip of nose. By now her brother would be livid and broken out of the pantry. So Damien would have some explaining to do, but no one would take her from him again.

Chapter 20

Four days later

“I cannot believe the two of you did all that behind my back.”

Jo lay in her bed, her back propped up against the wall. She had awoken only an hour ago to find Evelyn seated beside her, holding her hand. According to Evelyn, Belle refused to go home until Jo gained consciousness and remained in the room adjacent to hers. In fact, the entire Middleton clan had moved in, much to her brother’s annoyance.

Damien hadn’t come to see her yet, but Jo took comfort in her dream where he sat beside her, asleep in the chair Evelyn now occupied. What a wonderful dream, one that had warmed her heart.

“I’m sorry.”

Evelyn sighed, trading places with the chair to take a seat on the bed alongside Jo. “I nearly died when Grey told me what happened and demanded to know if I was part of it. He did not believe me when I said no. The deranged man almost took me over his knee!”

Jo flinched when she tried to laugh. “Do not make me laugh, it hurts.”

“As well it should. Not only is there nothing to laugh about, you almost died!”

“I am very much aware of that. How is my brother?”

Evelyn blanched. “He walks around bellowing at everyone. He even threatened to stuff whoever dares enter his home. As far as I know, the only ones allowed are myself and the Middletons, as we weren’t involved,” Evelyn said with a pointed stare.

“Damien?”

“Oh, he is here, you needn’t worry about that. He never left. I imagine he’s resting in the room across from yours. I dragged him from your side to be alone with you. He’s not left your side since he brought you home.”

“So I haven’t imagined it?”

Evelyn shook her head.

“But my brother?”

“So far St. Aldwyn has managed to elude your brother but refuses to leave you alone in the same house as that grizzly. His words, mind you, and he never leaves you alone for long. No doubt, he will barge through the door in a moment or two.”

Jo’s heart melted at the news. “What of Belle?”

“Furious, frustrated and cursing like a sailor.”

She chuckled at the news and glanced down at her injured hand,

wondering if she would ever be the same again.

"The doctor said your hand will be fine, that you were lucky. But you have nightmares," Evelyn whispered softly. "It's one of the reasons St. Aldwyn refuses to leave your side for long. It gets worse when he is away and better once you hear his voice."

Jo's cheeks reddened.

"How long have I been unconscious and what happened to Cartwright?" Jo asked with sudden worry.

"It's been four days. You should have woken up days ago, but the doctor said we must give you time. He said you'd wake up when you were ready, it's what put your brother in such a grizzly mood."

"And Cartwright?" Jo insisted.

"The horrid man is gone."

A breath of relief left her lungs. It was truly over, then. The knowledge somehow made the pain worth it.

"Do you love him?" Evelyn asked her, her voice light and gentle.

Jo nodded.

"You should tell him that. The poor man has been dreading to face you. He says you will send him away once you wake up, given your last encounter."

"He told you?" Jo asked surprised.

"No, but you should have," her friend reprimanded her again. "Be that as it may, I only know the bits and pieces he mutters when he believes no one is about."

Damn. Evelyn had probably discovered more than she'd let on. She wanted to ask if Damien had muttered anything else, like words of love? Dare she hope he loved her? It seemed so impossible for a notorious rake like him to fall in love with someone as ordinary as her. But even if he loved her, Damien was used to loads of women and their attentions.

"What if he becomes bored with me and strays?"

"To stray would mean St. Aldwyn failed at being a husband. The mere suggestion would never sit well with him."

Jo chuckled. No, it would not.

Belle's earlier words of taking a risk came back, testing the merit in her mind.

"How did you find the courage to take a chance with Grey?" Jo asked.

A small smile twitched on Evelyn's lips before she replied, "I don't think I did, to be honest. I allowed Grey to talk me into taking a chance, but it always felt to me as though he just took the lead and I followed. Even after we married I was still afraid. He saw my fear of course, and every day he makes certain I know how much he loves me."

Jo smiled. "It seems so easy."

Evelyn shook her head. "The risk or even allowing him to talk me into taking a chance was the easy part. The hard part is trusting him not to hurt me. Looking back now, I believe that's why I always ran away. I did not trust him not to fail me in some way." Evelyn touched her hand. "Perhaps that is why you are reluctant to let Damien into your life. You don't trust what crackles between the two of you will last. You don't trust him to stay."

A shadow filled the doorway, drawing their attention to the figure that appeared.

"Is that true?" Damien whispered.

Jo devoured the sight of him. She wanted to touch him, breathe in his scent. But the uncertainty she caught in his gaze gave her pause. How much had he heard?

He stepped into the room, his gaze a silent demand for Evelyn to leave. Jo wanted to protest when her friend scrambled from the bed, but it seemed she did not have any choice in the matter. She recognized the determination in Damien's eyes. He would not leave until they discussed what happened.

"I'll be back later," Evelyn said as she rose to leave. Jo nodded and watched the door shut, leaving her alone in the room with the man she loved. The look he shot her heated her blood.

"Josephine."

Her name rolled off his tongue with a purr, all his emotions poured out in that one syllable. Relief, love, happiness, determination and hurt. Did she not trust him to be faithful? His chest ached that she believed that of him, though he could hardly blame her. He'd always been a rake. Until he'd met her.

"Is it true?" he asked again, taking another step toward her. His eyes missed nothing, taking note of the strain around her eyes and the tired look upon her face.

Her eyes met his. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her gaze holding his.

Damien nodded. He moved to her side, pulling up the chair. His face rested on his hands as he regarded her with brooding globes. Exotic eyes stared back, waiting for him to say what he'd come to say. In a tired gesture he rubbed his hands over his eyes.

"When I found you, strapped on a table, Cartwright standing over you, I thought you were dead. My whole world crumbled to shards of nothingness in that moment." Anguish, raw and open weaved into his words.

"Damien—"

"No, let me finish," Damien interrupted, taking her hand in his.

"You lay on that table bruised and sliced up, a bloody knife stuck through your hand and I wanted to die, right alongside you." He shuddered when her hand connected with him.

"I still have nightmares about finding your lifeless body. I don't think I will ever get over that sight."

"Oh, Damien. It's all my fault—"

He shook his head. "No, you saved Lady Constance from that brute; you had the right of it."

"I'm sorry for what I said to you. I did not mean any of it, I was just so mad."

He kissed her hand. "I know."

They stared at each other, savoring the life that flowed within them.

"I'll take the risk."

Damien blinked.

"I will follow you to the ends of the earth."

His eyes widened, "I beg your pardon? You will do what?"

"I've decided I'd rather have you as my husband than live what would only be an empty, hollow, and bleak existence without you."

Damien's breath hitched. Had he heard her correctly? "Josephine?"

"I love you, you daft man," she blurted.

The words froze him. His body tense and his eyes alert, he waited for her to continue.

"I did not want to admit it to myself, even now; it still scares me to think about it. But it's not because I thought you would leave me because you're not capable of remaining with only one woman, I just couldn't believe that a man like you would want to stay with me."

Damien let out a shaky breath. "Josephine—"

"No please, let me explain," she interrupted, squeezing his hand. "My belief that you would never commit was only an excuse. I told myself that because I was the one who didn't want to commit to anything permanent, because I was scared of getting hurt. I—"

Damien silenced her with a kiss so tender she moaned into his lips. He broke away only enough to whisper, "I love you Josephine, eternity cannot measure what I feel for you."

It was the most magical and romantic moment—and it was interrupted by a grizzly, snorting from the doorway.

"It's about damn time."

Damien sighed, his forehead pressing against Jo's before they both glanced to the door. Craven appeared behind the grizzly.

"This isn't going to work," Damien said loud enough for them to hear.

"What won't work?" Craven asked.

Warton scowled. "Who let you in my house anyway? Now that my sister is awake, I can dangle your hide in my trophy room along with the rest of your band of criminals."

"I didn't do anything," Craven objected with a scowl.

Brahm lifted his steely gaze in Craven's direction. "You're involved somehow, or else you wouldn't be here."

"There is that," Craven said dryly.

Damien and Jo glanced at each other confounded. The he rose in one swift movement, scooping her up into his arms, causing her to gasp.

He stilled. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," she squeaked, glancing at her brother.

"What the hell are you doing?" Warton snapped from the doorway.

Damien shot him a shrewd glance. "I'm taking her home."

"This is her home."

"To my home, where she belongs," Damien corrected.

Her hands wrapped around his neck without protest as he carried her from the bed to where her brother stood scowling at them.

"This isn't proper."

Damien raised his eyebrows. "Neither is allowing me to sneak around your home and sleep in your sister's bedroom for the past four days."

Warton's lips actually twitched as he stepped aside. "Just marry her before she makes me an uncle."

"Brahm!" Josephine gasp, shocked at this new side of her brother.

"That is the plan," Damien murmured, a smile forming on his lips.

"Wait," she said as Damien strolled past her brother. "I'm sorry for everything, Brahm, I truly am."

He waived away her apology. "You have nothing to apologize for. I don't blame you, I blame everyone else."

"Why?"

Warton shrugged and Damien started to walk briskly away, suspecting what would come next.

"Because they are men and they should have known better to involve a woman in such affairs."

At the sight of her shocked outrage Damien quickened his pace, better to keep away from the grizzly, before it turned into another spat. He wanted her alone, in his bed and in his home, where he could watch over her and never let her out of his sight again.

"What nerve!"

"He's your brother honey, he only feels protective over you."

Her eyes narrowed on him. "Do you believe that because I'm a woman I'm incapable of making rational decisions?"

“No, you will always be my partner, the better half of me. But that doesn’t mean I want you dashing off into the night, rescuing damsels and getting in trouble.”

“I do not—”

“Without me.”

Sweet laughter met his ears and she nuzzled in his warm embrace. “Don’t worry darling, I will always take you with me when I dash into trouble.”

Damien groaned, causing another chuckle. He looked forward to every second of it.

Coming soon

***The Devil Meets Lady Veronica Pebblesworth
August 2016***

Thanks for reading!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Wilde developed a passion for reading when she had nothing better to do than lurk in the library during her lunch breaks. Her love affair with pen and paper followed soon after she had devoured all of the library's historical romance books!

When she's not meddling in the lives of her characters or drinking copious amounts of coffee, she's off on adventures with her partner in crime.

Wilde lives in a town at the foot of the Outeniqua Mountains, South Africa.

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